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# Material culture and domestic texts: Textiles in the texts of Warner, Adams, Wilson, Sadlier, Stoddard, and Phelps

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**MATERIAL CULTURE AND DOMESTIC TEXTS:  
TEXTILES IN THE TEXTS OF  
WARNER, ADAMS, WILSON, SADLIER, STODDARD, AND PHELPS**

**BY**

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**DISSERTATION**

**Submitted to the University of New Hampshire**

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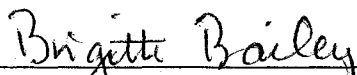
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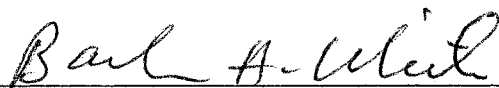
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Figure 1

Adams, Hester Ann. "A Sheet Prepared and Written According  
to Mother Ann's Directions"

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# **ABSTRACT**

## **MATERIAL CULTURE AND DOMESTIC TEXTS: TEXTILES IN THE TEXTS OF WARNER, ADAMS, WILSON, SADLIER, STODDARD, AND PHELPS**

by

Laura Smith

University of New Hampshire, May, 2007

In “Material Culture and Domestic Texts: Textiles in the Texts of Warner, Adams, Wilson, Sadlier, Stoddard, and Phelps,” I draw from recently revised notions of the discourse of domesticity to argue that the imagery of textile production, consumption, and containment enables authors to configure experimental domestic forms. Mid-nineteenth-century authors used textiles—including their inherent “textility” and feminine associations—to play out new domestic configurations in response to exigencies of economy, race, intemperance, competitive desire, and labor. Their literature demystifies textiles’ ability to invest social hierarchies of race, class, gender, and religion; it also enacts material changes of women’s domestic spaces and roles in order to model ideological shifts. Because I trace the externalization of domestic values in material practices and conditions, I use material culture and historical approaches to contextualize textile production and consumption as part of a contested, ever-expanding fabric language.

My project begins with consideration of a “normative” imperialism of textiles as productive of white, middle-class domesticity and then turns to study those texts which, through metaphorical and ritualized uses of textiles, resist the domesticity of true womanhood. I consider works by Susan Warner, Canterbury Shaker sister Hester Ann Adams, Harriet Wilson, Irish-Catholic novelist Mary Anne Sadlier, Elizabeth Stoddard, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps to argue for textiles’ role in the defense and negotiation of domesticity. For a few brief decades in the mid-nineteenth century, authors in the United States and also abroad interrogated the potential of the growing textile industry. These women authors plotted a path from passive, angelic, and victimized heroines toward a New Womanhood dictated not by moral pitch but by professional and material engagement with the world. At a time when women were often legally invisible and female literary heroines ethereal and self-effacing, these women authors crafted a material presence not only through their texts but through the use of substantial textile goods to reconfigure domestic space.

## INTRODUCTION

*I had a comfortable sense of property, when I took possession of my own room. It was better, after all, to live with a father and mother, who would adopt my ideas. Even the sea might be mine.*

Cassandra Morgeson in Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons* (1862)

Elizabeth Stoddard's protagonist in *The Morgesons* uses material culture to negotiate ideological constructs of domesticity that are as powerful as the sea; she is one of many nineteenth-century female protagonists to explore the power of textiles in claiming subjectivity and space. In the six works of this study, textiles provide the means of exploring mid-nineteenth-century domestic spaces and practices amidst the varied forms of production supplied by a burgeoning northeastern consumer economy. With their symbolic, semiotic, and formative properties, textiles (and their literary representations) are the primary means of differentiating new potentialities of domesticity and for negotiating new social conditions.<sup>1</sup> In fact, textiles become the material site of competing interpretations of domestic ideology. Textiles are used to justify theories of "pious consumption" and "domestic environmentalism" by which consumers are refined, the nation stabilized, and the millennium sped. On the other hand, the alienated labor of textile production in a consumer economy undermines notions of separate, gendered spheres and reveals domestic textiles' political uses in class and race demarcation. In "Material Culture and Domestic Texts: Textiles in the Texts of Warner, Adams, Wilson, Sadlier, Stoddard, and Phelps," I draw from

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<sup>1</sup> Prown, "The Truth of Material Culture," 13.

recently revised notions of the discourse of domesticity to argue that the imagery of textile production and consumption enables authors to configure experimental domestic forms. When enacted through textiles, the “imperial” project of conventional white, middle-class domesticity may “produce unforeseen implementations.”<sup>2</sup> Cassandra Morgeson’s control over her room—inscribed with swaths of blue damask and chintz—signals such an implementation, one of aggressive, instinctual middle-class womanhood.

Nineteenth-century authors such as Stoddard used textiles—including their inherent “textility” and feminine associations—to play out new domestic configurations in response to exigencies of economy, race, intemperance, competitive desire, and labor. Because I trace the externalization of domestic values in material practices and conditions, I use material culture and historical approaches to contextualize textile production and consumption as part of a contested, ever-expanding fabric language.<sup>3</sup> An analysis of authors’ uses of textile imagery demystifies textiles’ ability to reify social hierarchies of race, class, gender, and religion. Literary representations of textiles enacted material changes in women’s domestic spaces and roles in order to suggest or model ideological shifts.

My project begins with consideration of a “normative” imperialism of textiles as productive of white, middle-class domesticity and then turns to study those texts which resist the domesticity of true womanhood. The six authors in this project depict metaphorical and ritualized uses of textiles effecting or reflecting the ideology of domesticity. I consider works by Susan Warner, Canterbury Shaker sister Hester

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<sup>2</sup> Romero, *Home Fronts*, 112.

<sup>3</sup> Myers, “Introduction: The Empire of Things,” 20-21.

Ann Adams, Harriet Wilson, Irish-Catholic novelist Mary Anne Sadlier, Elizabeth Stoddard, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps to argue for textiles' role in the defense and negotiation of domesticity. In Chapter One, I argue that Susan Warner's novel *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) uses refining textile consumption to outline a supposedly normative, white, Protestant, middle-class ideology of domesticity. The succeeding chapters demonstrate how authors reimagine domesticity through varied practices of textile production and consumption. For example, in Chapter Two, I examine Shaker texts (ca. 1845) that use literary and graphic portrayals of textiles (and their biblical associations) to stand in for the range of sacralized labor that enabled the self-sufficiency of a communal (rather than nuclear) family. Since Shakers wrote no fiction, I rely on Shakers' illustrated spirit messages and poems, replete with home and textile imagery—to show how Hester Ann Adams and others justified through textile practices their communal religion. Chapters three and four address Sadlier's *Bessy Conway* (1861) and Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859)—both novels of domestic service in which garment consumption is the primary form of textile expression—to implicate textiles in personal and domestic transformation. Sadlier, for instance, cautions against textile intemperance (the overconsumption of textiles) as a particularly urban danger that threatens families; Wilson, racialized by textile deprivation, sees textile consumption (such as in constructing her own garments) as a claim to subjectivity. Stoddard's novel *The Morgesons* (1862), analyzed in Chapter Five, depicts textiles as part of a sensual lexicon breaking down the gendered spheres of domesticity. Cassandra Morgeson's own room, an explosion of blue fabric, signals her declaration of private possession and her refusal of

dictated roles. In Chapter Six, Phelps's 1871 novel *The Silent Partner* reveals the failed utopian promise of textile mill communities to support a mixed-class, unmarried sisterhood. Indeed, the primary women of the novel compare themselves to textile objects that seem inadequate for the tasks to which they are assigned. All together, these works of literature trace a progression of textiles' potential to provide new configurations of "domesticity," including redefinitions of home and family. The implications of textiles' representations extend far beyond these particular works and offer a more general cultural critique anticipating literature of the Age of Conspicuous Consumption.

### **Textiles and the Ideology of Domesticity**

To ignore the textile imagery in these texts is to ignore the ideological tensions they evince. Ellen Montgomery's textile uses in *The Wide, Wide World*—and Cassandra Morgeson's in *The Morgesons*, for that matter—show how authors used material objects to rearrange formations of home and identity. During a time of emerging gendered spheres, textiles in literature enabled authors to cope with "ambivalent feelings by putting them into symbols and parables that could be vividly comprehended."<sup>4</sup> In *The Wide, Wide World* protagonist Ellen Montgomery's devotion to white textiles reveals one such tension. She sighs with bliss upon seeing friend Alice Humphreys's room, a nineteenth-century literary setting that would nevertheless serve well as a twenty-first-century fabric softener commercial, complete with white dimity curtains billowing at the windows and "snow-white muslin" draping the furniture (163). Ellen's love of white goods lays claim to class and race

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<sup>4</sup> Bronner, "Reading Consumer Culture," 14.

privilege through which she asserts a middle-class, domestic womanhood (which can afford to maintain white fabrics) and a racial whiteness opposed to its alleged opposite: blackness or drabness in its textile and raced forms. Characters' conscious use of textiles as both manipulable and transformative shows women's desire to negotiate tensions of gender, space, race, class, or religion through textile expression.<sup>5</sup>

Protean, shape-shifting textiles are the perfect symbols and expressions of a versatile domestic womanhood. Roland Barthes, in his discussion of textile fashion in particular, describes the expressive and experimental nature of fashion as "a dream of identity and play."<sup>6</sup> I extend Barthes's notion of fashion to the nineteenth-century world of textile production and consumption modeled in the six works of this study. Textiles used in home furnishing—Warner's dimity, Adams's homespun, Stoddard's and Phelps's damask—and non-couture garments—as in Sadlier and Wilson—provide a forum in which women could try on identities and affiliations in sometimes playful, temporary, and experimental ways. And like the quickly shifting fashion industry Barthes describes, the nineteenth-century textile industry rolled out new color schemes, patterns, weaves, and weights unceasingly. The ephemeral nature of fashion—as well as of textile patterns—continually expands the "language" and potential of goods in playful constructions.<sup>7</sup> Thus Cassandra Morgeson can try on dresses of imitative pink calico as she flirts with ideological conformity or, later, plaster her room with blue damask and chintz deliberately to conceal her true tastes. Because she is well aware that, as cultural historian Katherine Grier explains, "the

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<sup>5</sup> See Heneghan, *Whitewashing America*.

<sup>6</sup> Barthes, *The Fashion System*, 255.

<sup>7</sup> Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 12.

act of choosing always makes a statement about one's personal and cultural values," Cassandra is careful to isolate, valorize, and appropriate textile qualities that preserve her right to changeability.<sup>8</sup> In effect, authors could experiment with new social constructions of home and womanhood via textile imagery.

Current critics have shown that the supposed monolith of white, middle-class domesticity has always been a contested construct; my work shows that authors contest domesticity through textile practices. The authors in this study contend with a white, middle-class ideology of domesticity promulgated through text and images in periodicals such as *Godey's Lady's Book* and *Peterson's*; domestic and architectural handbooks such as those by Catharine Beecher and Andrew Jackson Downing; and novels, such as Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*.<sup>9</sup> Popular periodicals described domestic interiors; novels, including "woman's fiction," deified the female protagonist who could effect moral and spiritual conversions within the home.

As Barbara Welter ("The Cult of True Womanhood," 1966) long ago made clear, domesticity was a central tenet of nineteenth-century true womanhood, which also included piety, purity, and submissiveness.<sup>10</sup> Nancy Cott, in her "Preface to the Second Edition" (1997) of her seminal work, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (1977), clarifies the discourse of domesticity as

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<sup>8</sup> Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Popular domestic and architectural manuals included Lydia Maria Child's *American Frugal Housewife* (1828); J.C. Loudon's *Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm, and Villa Architecture and Furniture* (1833); Catharine Beecher's *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841); A.J. Downing's *Architecture of Country Houses* (1850); and Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The American Woman's Home* (1869), among many others. This selection does not include the wide selection of servants' manuals of domestic economy. See Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, or Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart*, for further titles.

<sup>10</sup> Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 152.



the ideological presumptions, institutional practices, and strongly held habits of mind insisting that the home must be guided by a calm, devoted, and self-abnegating wife and mother: that with her presence, the home would serve—and it had to serve, for social order and individual well-being—as a moral beacon, a restorative haven from the anxieties and adversities of public life and commerce, comforting the hardworking husband and provider for the family, and furnishing a nursery of spiritual and civic values for the children.<sup>11</sup>

Discursive formations of middle-class domesticity located it within a single-family home in which the wife and mother could model non-competitive cooperation and nurture, particularly creating an environment that encouraged moral, civic, and spiritual duty. At least for the middle classes, new cultural patterns established the home as a primarily feminine domain of family nurture. Changing patterns of work—from an agrarian to a market economy, and from youths' apprenticeships to institutionalized education—shifted the focus of women's domestic labor to child-rearing in the home.<sup>12</sup> An ideology of middle-class domesticity emerged.

Of course, as with any ideal, domestic reality was usually far different. Twentieth-century critics frequently point out that even many of the authors most strident in promoting white, middle-class domesticity—Catharine Beecher and Sarah Josepha Hale of *Godey's*, for instance—did not obey all of its precepts. Barbara Welter concedes that social, political, and economic activities such as

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<sup>11</sup> Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, xvii.

<sup>12</sup> Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home*, 6.

industrialization and social reform stretched the notions of true womanhood.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, even in the mid-nineteenth-century, domesticity was not “a monolithic or unchallenged ideology.”<sup>14</sup> Population imbalances, racial and religious prejudices, personal preferences, and new availability of industrial wage labor and communitarian projects made middle-class domesticity seem improbable, inadvisable, or simply unappealing. Moreover, women who aspired to middle-class domesticity from a variety of classes, races, and ethnicities often found that their identities did not accord with others’ views of their identities, thus quashing senses of selfhood.<sup>15</sup> Women’s aspirations often went unrecognized, even scoffed at. *Our Nig’s* protagonist, Frado, for instance, or the Irish domestics as described in *Bessy Conway* were often met coldly in their attempts to emulate certain facets of middle-class domesticity. This, of course, did not prevent their enactment of domesticity but did reveal the faultlines of middle-class ideology. Kate McCullough (*Regions of Identity: The Construction of America in Women’s Fiction, 1885-1914*, 1999) and Cathy Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher (“Introduction,” *No More Separate Spheres! A Next Wave American Studies Reader*, 2002) have explained how “variables” of “race, sexuality, class, nation, empire, affect, region, and occupation” (and I would add religion) complicate any one conception of womanhood.<sup>16</sup> These variables also work in conjunction with the various spatial and material conditions that form or reflect the variety of women’s subjectivities and attitudes toward domesticity.

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<sup>13</sup> Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 174.

<sup>14</sup> Dobson, “Read the Bible,” 25. Romero, *Home Fronts*, 12. Other critics have added their voices to contest the unquestioning, even self-fulfilling replication of the tenets of true womanhood and domesticity. See Ryan, *The Empire of the Mother*, 2, and Baym, *Woman’s Fiction*, xxxix.

<sup>15</sup> See Stone, “Appearance and the Self,” 223.

<sup>16</sup> Davidson & Hatcher, “Introduction,” 8-9.

Welter's and Cott's foundational definitions nevertheless provide a starting point for comprehending nineteenth-century domestic practices. In *Home Fronts: Domesticity and Its Critics in the Antebellum United States* (1997) Lora Romero explains that the discourse of domesticity is a shifting shorthand with which to discuss women's roles. She writes, "Ideologies like domesticity become popular, I would argue, not because they provide the masses with a finite and orderly set of beliefs relieving them from the burden of thinking but instead because they give people an expansive logic, a meaningful vocabulary, and rich symbols through which to *think* about their world."<sup>17</sup> Domesticity becomes the material and ideological structure which women manipulate and individuate as they attempt to gain power in "mobile' power relations" between the genders.<sup>18</sup>

Domesticity, ostensibly a project of home reform, was frequently extended rhetorically to code women's influence on the nation. Much as in Linda Kerber's concept of the Republican Mother, white, middle-class domestic women could exert their spiritual and moral will on their family's voting men. But domesticity was also deployed, as Lora Romero (1997), Lori Merish (*Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, 2000), and Amy Kaplan ("Manifest Domesticity," 2002) have noted, as a broader process of acculturation. Domesticity was not merely the home-oriented ideology of family nurture; it was also a colonizing practice. As Kaplan writes, "[D]omesticity is more mobile and less stabilizing; it travels in contradictory circuits both to expand and contract the boundaries of home and nation and to produce shifting conceptions of

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<sup>17</sup> Romero, *Home Fronts*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Romero, *Home Fronts*, 5.

the foreign.”<sup>19</sup> The foreign included, for example, uncouth frontier settlers whose class affiliations made them targets for domestic reform as well as class differentiation; the foreign included racialized objects of sentimental ownership whose domestic aspirations were denigrated as farcical imitation<sup>20</sup>; the foreign included immigrants whose languages and lifeways challenged traditional patterns of family structure; the foreign included those immigrant Catholics whose allegiance to the Pope supposedly seditiously threatened the American nation. As the works of this study suggest, however, the acculturating, domesticating, even polarizing project of white, middle-class domesticity was contested by literary productions that modeled material and ideological reconfigurations of home and nation.

In a recent essay, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History” (2002), historian Linda Kerber advocates a move away from the paradigm of separate, gendered spheres that has governed much scholarship on nineteenth-century women’s lives and literature. Instead, she proposes the concept of “dynamic relationships” negotiated within different historical and societal situations. She suggests that the differences among these dynamic relationships might be articulated by careful study of “the physical spaces to which women were assigned, those in which they lived, and those they chose for themselves” and urges “[s]tressing the interplay between the metaphorical and the literal.”<sup>21</sup> Variations in spatial and material arrangement produce variations in subjectivity and gender identity, she suggests. Dolores Hayden offers such an approach with her 1981 book, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of*

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<sup>19</sup> Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” 185.

<sup>20</sup> See Melish, *Disowning Slavery*.

<sup>21</sup> Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds,” 49.

*Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities*. She explains that “contemporary feminists have overlooked the private home as a spatial component of their economic oppression in the same way that material feminists overlooked the sexual division of labor as a social component.”<sup>22</sup> In particular, architectural and material arrangements reinforce gender roles and limit women's independence (e.g., confine women to single family homes) by structuring the replication of labor, such as cooking, in individual kitchens.

Hayden and Kerber, writing over twenty years apart, indicate a continuing need for the study of women's spaces as productive of subjectivity. Spatial arrangements (including architectural design) and artifacts within these spaces offer both conscious and unconscious commentaries on the ideology of womanhood and practices of daily living. The discourse of middle-class domesticity elides many concerns nineteenth-century authors later raised by exploring textiles' impact on the home. For example, thus does Ellen in *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) value “fine” merinos for their expressive and formative properties of refinement; so does Perley in *The Silent Partner* (1871) critique textile products of alienated labor for their almost literal absorption of workers' lives. The exposure of the labor behind the “commodity fetish” disputes and cautions against the powers of transformation with which textiles are supposedly endowed.<sup>23</sup> Nineteenth-century authors play with the idea that critiquing the domestic space and its artifacts may both effect and reflect new, altered forms of domestic practice and womanhood; their texts challenge the notion of static spheres.

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<sup>22</sup> Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, 295.

<sup>23</sup> See Sherman, “Mapping the Culture of Abundance.”

### Textiles and Northeastern Texts

The novel became “a political and cultural forum,” a “paramount reality” for readers who read realistic domestic detail “mimetically.”<sup>24</sup> In her study, *Fashion and Fiction: Dress in Art and Literature in Stuart England* (2005), Aileen Ribeiro argues that the “objective and imagined representation (‘fashion’ and ‘fiction’)—are two sides of ‘truth’ and they can overlap in the imaginative re-creation of reality [...].”<sup>25</sup> Nineteenth-century authors’ experiments with fictional dress and textile interiors provide a similar “truth.” By playing out textile transformations in novels and other literature, the women authors of this study proposed new forms of lived domestic womanhood, communal and celibate, self-possessed and economically self-sufficient. The authors discussed here—Warner, Adams, Wilson, Sadlier, Stoddard, and Phelps—viewed textiles as the dynamic agents of domestic transformation rather than as the static setting descriptors of immobile class or character. In fact, I’ve chosen authors whose characters consciously manipulate textiles. While critics have also noted the heavy use of textiles and domestic detail in work by authors such as Gustave Flaubert, Honoré de Balzac, Elizabeth Gaskell, Margaret Oliphant, Harriet Martineau, Charlotte Yonge, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon<sup>26</sup> (novelists producing works between 1830 and 1870, around the same time as the authors of this study), not all explore the transformative potential of domestic textiles.

The six works in this study employ either extensive textile imagery (where

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<sup>24</sup> Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*, 11, 262.

<sup>25</sup> Ribeiro, *Fashion and Fiction*, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Logan, *The Victorian Parlour*, 206; Barthes, *The Fashion System*, 10; Miller, “Alienable Gifts,” 107.

fabrics are identified by name) or key textile scenes or settings discussed by the characters themselves. These works derive from a select group of authors conscious of textiles' agency. These texts derive from mid-nineteenth-century, northeastern authors from varying backgrounds who were privy to a particular historical moment and region, where textiles were readily available and actually permeated daily life. I focus on women, but that is not to say that men were not intrigued by textile potential. But women were more closely associated with textiles which were coded feminine through activities such as carding, spinning, weaving, dyeing, sewing, laundering, mending, ironing.

The myriad textile references in these works suggest that their authors were themselves fascinated by the potential ideological import of textiles. Cultural historian Katherine Grier explains that nineteenth-century textiles, in particular, carried a "chain of historical and cultural associations" and held "considerable fascination throughout the nineteenth century because the industrialization of textile production changed their availability and cost so profoundly."<sup>27</sup> In fact, cultural historians Jane Nylander and Katherine Grier associate the period of 1840 or 1850 to 1870 with the productive and consumptive craze for the "soft furnishings" of domestic upholstery fabrics.<sup>28</sup>

Mid-nineteenth-century authors were responding to an expanding textile industry that fueled textile desire as well as urban and industrial hope and woe. The growth of the textile industry through the introduction of fully mechanized processes produced an abundance of mass-produced textiles. Moreover, new synthetic dyes

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<sup>27</sup> Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 15.

<sup>28</sup> See Nylander, *Fabrics for Historic Buildings*.

promised more vivid, permanent colors that didn't rot the fabric they were intended to embellish. Fabrics of all colors, qualities (i.e., fineness or coarseness), textures (i.e., plain weave, twill weave, jacquard weave, etc.), thicknesses, and composition (i.e., linen, cotton, wool, silk) were readily available. Factories changed textile patterns seasonally, thus providing ever more fabric options and colors. Periodicals printed fashion plates and descriptions of domestic interiors, suggesting further uses for textiles. Textile objects and consumer subjects proliferated.

### **Theoretical Approaches to Textiles**

My study relies on material culture approaches, sometimes originating in Marxist analysis, to place textile objects as part of a mutually constitutive subject-object relationship. This study relies most heavily on the work of cultural historian Katherine Grier, literary critic Lori Merish, material culture theorist Daniel Miller, and Marx's concept of alienated labor in order to link practices of production and consumption to subjectivity under domestic ideologies. My project attends to both consumption and production of meaning—as well as to expressive and formative objectification—in mid-nineteenth-century fictional objects. My focus on Ellen Montgomery's dimity table-skirt or Perley Kelso's sense of herself as a damask curtain, for example, opens up a critique of production and consumption as constitutive of homes and womanhood. With their occasionally critical or unconventional portrayals of domesticity, nineteenth-century women's texts provided models that smoothed the way for New Womanhood and alternate domestic practices.



The authors described in this study were likely responding to notions of “domestic environmentalism” by which the architectural arrangements and furnished interiors of homes could influence inhabitants’ characters.<sup>29</sup> The movement originated in aspirations to architectural sincerity through which a house, its construction and furnishings, were honestly to reflect a family’s status and character. Nineteenth-century architect A.J. Downing writes, “[I]t will not appear singular to our readers, that we believe much of the character of every man may be read in his house. If he has moulded its leading features from the foundation, it will give a clue to a large part of his character. If he has only taken it from other hands, it will, in its internal details and use, show, at a glance, something of his daily thoughts and life of the family that inhabits it.”<sup>30</sup> In turn, the comfortably and tastefully decorated interior that reflected character and refinement invited inhabitants and visitors to spend their leisure time reading, singing, socializing, and admiring the home’s good taste under the aegis of the domestic environment. Surely a parlor with upholstered easy chairs, bright chintz curtains, and a soft carpet could go a long way to enticing family members to spend time there, even in the midst of urban temptations of the theatre or tavern.<sup>31</sup>

Just as a refined domestic environment reflected character, a refining domestic environment could effect it. In *Sentimental Materialism* (2000), Lori Merish argues that domestic goods formed a mode of proselytization:

According to this ideal, a synthesis of pietistic Protestant and neoclassical aesthetic categories, ‘refined’ domestic artifacts would

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<sup>29</sup> Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Downing, *Architecture of Country Houses*, 25.

<sup>31</sup> Klimasmith, *At Home in the City*, 1; Leveen, “Dwelling in the House of Oppression,” 562.

'civilize' and 'socialize' persons and awaken 'higher' sentiments; such objects would seduce wayward individuals into the regenerative sociability of domesticity, and, by inspiring purified sentiments, could draw individuals to God.<sup>32</sup>

Textiles such as parlor upholstery were a primary means of effecting and reflecting one's refinement through choice of goods.

Domestic goods—the curtains, carpets, upholstery, furniture—are constitutive of our subjectivity without our noticing. Jules David Prown, art historian and material culture theorist, posits material culture as “the manifestation of culture through material productions.” He suggests that the careful analysis of objects—their physical properties and context—reveals “the beliefs of the individuals who commissioned, fabricated, purchased, or used them, and, by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which these individuals belonged.”<sup>33</sup> Daniel Miller, anthropologist and material culture theorist, justifies this attention to what he calls “the humility of things”:

The surprising conclusion is that objects are important not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, but often precisely because we do not ‘see’ them. The less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behavior, without being open to challenge. They determine what takes place to the extent that we are

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<sup>32</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 90.

<sup>33</sup> Prown, “The Truth of Material Culture,” 11.

unconscious of their capacity to do so.<sup>34</sup>

Miller's concept of the humility of objects partially shadows the tenets of nineteenth-century domestic environmentalism which articulate a more overt approach to using home arrangement to influence character.

Indeed, other recent material culture historians have built on Prownian analysis and Marxist commodity theories to study the means by which objects reflect beliefs. Daniel Miller outlines a theory of objectification in which subjects and objects (e.g., women and their textiles) are mutually constitutive. He explains that the theory hopes to show "how the things that people make, make people."<sup>35</sup>

Textiles are material culture objects "par excellence"<sup>36</sup> because they are so integral to effecting and reflecting subjectivity. Material culture theorist Judy Attfield has made a special study of the unique "textility" of textiles such as upholstery (including furniture coverings, curtains, carpets, bedding, etc.) and garments. Attfield's concept of textility implies that textiles have myriad qualities that can be isolated and turned to various purposes at different times or in different contexts. They have "unrealized futures"<sup>37</sup> because their textility implies that they may at any time exceed their current uses. Cultural historians have provided helpful analysis of material goods in the "real" world. Attention to textiles, fictional or "real," has generally related to topics of "fashion" or anthropological analysis of "primitive," non-industrial societies, where the textile good has not been commodified. I argue that the literary representations of textile objects, even in industrial societies, deserve

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<sup>34</sup> Miller, "Materiality: An Introduction," 5.

<sup>35</sup> Miller, "Materiality: An Introduction," 38.

<sup>36</sup> Attfield, *Wild Things*, 130.

<sup>37</sup> Keane, "Signs Are Not the Garb of Meaning," 193.

attention. In the nineteenth century, when property laws for white, married women were moving to protect property a woman brought to marriage, textiles represented the personal, movable property that created a matrilineal inheritance. Attention to the textiles in literature is not an arbitrary or profitless activity. Textiles are the ubiquitous goods that transform a house into a home; they are integral to subjectivity.

Recent book-length studies have provided extensive discussion of objects and domestic interiors in mid-nineteenth-century fiction. Lori Merish's *Sentimental Materialism* (2000) is an excellent example of the value of an object-focused study. Her study of the uses of objects in Sedgwick, Kirkland, Stowe, Hawthorne, Jacobs, and others uncovers a "sentimental materialism" pervasive in the texts: "sentimental sympathy [including anthropomorphization] promotes a deeply felt psychic investment in proprietary power over, and control of, objects of love, that [Merish calls] 'sentimental ownership.'"<sup>38</sup> Although she acknowledges sentimental consumption as a paternalistic (even disciplinary) move to delimit women's participation in the marketplace and home, she also sees sentimental consumption as yielding subjectivity—in the very act of choice and self-formation. Her theory of "sentimental materialism" provides a helpful critique of the subject-object relationship and how this extended the colonizing process of domestic practice. Bridget T. Heneghan's study *Whitewashing America: Material Culture and Race in the Antebellum Imagination* (2003) and Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd's essay collection *Domestic Space: Reading the Nineteenth-Century Interior* (1999) also implicate domestic objects in the defense of social hierarchies. My work builds on these

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<sup>38</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 4.

studies to suggest how writers resistant to acculturation and imperial ideologies used the very objects of their delimitation to expand ideological borders.

Other authors have written helpful shorter studies of objects in literature, particularly concerning the domestic goods in *Little Women* (1868) or the homes and gardens of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Even more specific to my project, authors such as Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray have described textualized goods (such as imprinted fabrics or ceramics) and texts themselves as "multivalent objects."<sup>39</sup> Joanne Dobson and Sara E. Quay have addressed the notion of the keepsake, such as Eva's curls in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or the workbox in *The Wide, Wide World*.<sup>40</sup> Christopher Hager discusses the material goods in *The Morgesons* as new vehicles of meaning in a changing economy.<sup>41</sup> Attention to material objects offers an analytic strategy that accounts for historical, economic, and social contexts and that enables an interpretation of the symbolic meanings in a language of goods.

For a few brief decades in the mid-nineteenth century, authors in the United States and also abroad interrogated the potential of the growing textile industry. Authors such as Warner, Adams, Wilson, Sadlier, Stoddard, and Phelps tried to envision the domestic possibilities and ramifications of textile technology and its proliferating products. The degree to which these women's visions tailored later literary depictions of womanhood is difficult to gauge, although I explore this briefly in my conclusion. Certainly, though, their uses of textiles to form and reform domestic ideology investigated the power available to women through textile

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<sup>39</sup> Zboray & Zboray, "Books, Reading, and the World of Goods," 588.

<sup>40</sup> Dobson, "Reclaiming Sentimental Literature," 273; Quay, "Homesickness in Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*," 41.

<sup>41</sup> Hager, "Hunger for the Literal."

production and consumption. At a time when women were often legally invisible and female literary heroines ethereal, diaphanous, and self-effacing, these women authors crafted a material presence not only through their texts but through the use of substantial textile goods.

## CHAPTER 1

### MIDDLE-CLASS TEXTILE REFINEMENT IN *THE WIDE, WIDE WORLD*

#### Introduction

Two months after Susan Warner (1819-1885) completed her second novel *Queechy* (1852), she thankfully cataloged in her journal the replenishment of the family's store of sugar, coffee, salt, raisins, and hams, among other necessities. Her literary earnings had met a critical need, and she groped through her mind for the next strand of ideas that would become her literary-financial lifeline. Warner writes in her journal, "Very busy sewing, and trying to get hold of a thread again."<sup>1</sup>

Warner thus ties her act of textual brainstorming to textile work, linking her work as a writer to private, domestic household chores. Warner's association of text and textile, whose production and care had become a social, feminine domain, legitimates her female authorship.<sup>2</sup> Of course, the very act of sewing allowed one's mind to roam, to pluck at various threads till they led to full stories, whether snarled or skeined. Women like Warner and her aunt and sister often sewed together, one perhaps reading aloud for those whose hands were busy but minds free. Warner later inquired, "was there hope she might thenceforth live by the pen?—or should

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<sup>1</sup> Warner qtd. in Anna Warner, *Susan Warner ("Elizabeth Wetherell")*, 353.

<sup>2</sup> Kathryn R. King, in "Of Needles and Pens and Women's Work," traces how women's association of textual work with textile production justified their literary production (81); she cites Jane Barker's *A Patch-Work Screen for the Ladies* (1723) as an early modern example of such an association: "the story of a female theft of public language" (79, 87).

she betake herself to needle and thread?"<sup>3</sup> Steel needle or steel nib? Her equation of the implements strengthens her authorial claims in a society where white, middle-class women's wage-earning in the public sphere was generally discouraged.<sup>4</sup>

Warner's literary work, "safely" equated with textile work, could enter the literary marketplace as a non-threatening contribution to the improvement of the family circle. Anna Warner, Susan's sister and biographer, fondly reviews the packets of letters from Susan's fans who praised her for "'making religious sentiment appear natural and attractive"'; she quotes a newspaper review claiming *The Wide, Wide World* "'is capable of doing more good than any other work other than the Bible.'"<sup>5</sup> Thus, the public voice of the novel enters readers' homes as a private female voice speaking with spiritual authority and chastening readers to a more Christian life.

Not to be overlooked, however, is that Warner's "weaving" of novels staved off penury and enabled the sisters to pay off the mortgage on their Constitution Island house in New York.<sup>6</sup> Her work was indeed engaged in the public market economy. Like a nineteenth-century Penelope<sup>7</sup>, Susan Warner lined four long sheets every day with her tight writing, lamenting the days when the words would not come and her production was shortened.<sup>8</sup> She approached her writing duties as she

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<sup>3</sup> Anna Warner, *Susan Warner ("Elizabeth Wetherell")*, 346.

<sup>4</sup> See Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business*, and Kelley, *Private Woman*.

<sup>5</sup> Anna Warner, *Susan Warner ("Elizabeth Wetherell")*, 344.

<sup>6</sup> For a fuller discussion of the satisfaction of the mortgage, see Weiss, "Biography," 352.

<sup>7</sup> Of course, Warner did not "unwrite" her manuscript each night although she did expunge sections from *The Wide, Wide World* before publication.

<sup>8</sup> Warner, *"Many Things Take My Time,"* 290.



did her sewing, a “very patient and ant-like labour [...] stitch—stitch—stitch; seam and gusset and band—band and gusset and seam; oh don’t speak of it.”<sup>9</sup>

Warner’s frequent use of textile metaphors to describe her literary work shows how textiles mediate one’s participation in culture.<sup>10</sup> Textiles are not only used metaphorically, as in Warner’s journals;<sup>11</sup> they are also used literally and literarily, endowed with supposedly natural, evocative properties. Warner and her young protagonist in *The Wide, Wide World* have a perhaps naïve but not uncommon faith in the power of domestic textiles to refine and elevate taste, particularly in the domestic setting.<sup>12</sup> Warner’s exploration of this “pious consumption,” by which “quality” textiles could refine one’s sensibilities and inspire spiritual contemplation,<sup>13</sup> relies upon textile imagery still associated with scenes of labor—either in production or maintenance. In short, Warner plays with textiles enmeshed in “chains of association”<sup>14</sup> that link, say, a tablecloth to notions of gentility in Warner’s novel. Material culture theorists have emphasized the unique materiality—the “textility”—of textiles.<sup>15</sup> Textility refers, in part, to textiles’ versatility, seen in their myriad physical forms and uses, and prevalence in daily life which have

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<sup>9</sup> Warner qtd. in Anna Warner, *Susan Warner (“Elizabeth Wetherell”)*, 223. In “Penelope’s Daughters: Images of Needlework in Eighteenth-Century Literature,” Cecilia Macheski associates the myth of Penelope’s twenty-year shroud-weaving not only with prudent use of resources to preserve her household but also with “an intrinsic part of domestic life” (98).

<sup>10</sup> In *Susan Warner (“Elizabeth Wetherell”)*, Anna Warner cites Susan’s journal references to her writing: “‘Anna writing and I weaving’” (328); “‘Meanwhile I make myself pretty quiet, only I am or have been worrying over my new thread which I am afraid wants knotting’” (328-329); “‘Very pleasant weaving’” (341).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Attfield, *Wild Things*, 132; Halttunen, *Confidence Men*, 153-190.

<sup>12</sup> See Gordon, “Woman’s Domestic Body,” 296; Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 5, 97; Federhen, *Accumulation and Display*, 15 for the softening, civilizing properties of textiles.

<sup>13</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 90.

<sup>14</sup> Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Attfield, *Wild Things*, 146.

made textiles and their isolated properties popular metonyms for social values, emotions, and associations.

Once denigrated for its attention to quotidian details of domestic life, woman's fiction such as *The Wide, Wide World*, I propose, reveals how "homely" textiles may both construct and reflect an ideology of domesticity.<sup>16</sup> In a study of "sentimental" or woman's fiction, narrative theorist Mikhail Bakhtin notes

'[t]he finely detailed descriptions, the . . . deliberateness with which petty secondary everyday details are foregrounded, the tendency of the representation to present itself as an unmediated impression *deriving from the object itself* and finally a pathos occasioned by helplessness and weakness rather than by heroic strength.'<sup>17</sup>

While I dispute Bakhtin's description of "petty secondary everyday details" and "pathos," I find his passage illuminative. He observes authors' use of fictional objects as directly communicative, as providing "an unmediated impression," as if objects are animated with natural, non-contingent powers of influence. Warner herself rather unquestioningly deploys finer-weave merinos as effective and reflective of taste and refinement, as if wool cloth literally has any connection to one's character. Therefore, "petty secondary everyday details" are not at all petty as they construct characters' subjectivity and reveal facets of domestic ideology in particular contexts. But lest we accuse Warner of the "false consciousness" of

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<sup>16</sup> In a piece for *The North American Review*, editor Caroline Kirkland writes a sort of defense for the details of woman's fiction: "In plot they are deficient, certainly; may almost be said to have none; and in variety they fall immeasurably behind, as every picture of common life drawn by a woman necessarily must, for want of the wide experience open only to the other sex" ("Novels and Novelists," 114).

<sup>17</sup> Bakhtin qtd. in Dobson "Reclaiming Sentimental Literature," 272; emphasis added.

commodity fetishism, we must recall her own and her protagonist's hard-earned lessons in the maintenance labor behind these "fetishized" white stockings and tablecloths, for instance. Part of the novel is set at a moment of transition between agrarian, pre-industrial textile production—the Swiss neighbor, Mrs. Vawse, spins, for example—and industrial production and consumption seen in the protagonist's purchase of merinos in a department store. Still, Warner's depictions of textile labor do not strip the objects of their special properties. The objects remain, to Warner and to her protagonist Ellen, the primary means and marker of middle-class domesticity.

In fact, Susan Warner in *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) bundles textility with domesticity, using textile imagery to model domestic refinement that strengthens the nation. Ellen Montgomery's consumption of refining and elevating textiles both enacts benevolent care-taking (in a type of sentimental materialism described by Lori Merish) and smooths class distinctions by modeling affordable, democratizing refinement.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, textile domesticity strengthens the home and nation by improving character and democratizing taste. Ellen promotes textile use that both recuperates Miss Fortune Emerson's Spartan republicanism from its resistance to gentility and moderates an increasingly high Victorian consumption that threatens to become the late-nineteenth-century conspicuous consumption analyzed by Thorstein Veblen. Ellen's project of textile refinement is closely related to her Christian growth and mission—from unformed to refined Christianity and textile sensibility—since both involve domesticating the unconverted and fostering the

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<sup>18</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 34, 41; Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 193.

shared sensibilities and sympathy at the heart of the American republic.<sup>19</sup> Warner thus creates Ellen as representative of an American domesticity founded in proper textile consumption that both reflects and effects the sensibility necessary for the middle-class home.

This chapter draws on material culture theorists and nineteenth-century authors of domestic and architectural handbooks to outline notions of textile domesticity. After outlining the life of the author, I turn to practices of domestic containment by which Ellen manages domestic space. I look at nineteenth-century theories of domestic environmentalism and current theories of objectification to explain the processes by which textiles effect refinement.

### **Biographical Overview**

Biographer Edward Halsey Foster notes that Warner, in her second novel *Queechy*, promotes an “aristocracy of virtue and manners” over an “aristocracy of wealth and birth.”<sup>20</sup> One could argue the same for *The Wide, Wide World*; indeed, Ellen Montgomery is every bit as virtuous and refined as her more wealthy acquaintances, the Marshmans, and even more so in several instances. An “aristocracy of virtue and manners” obligated its members to promote education and domestic refinement necessary to its perpetuation. Warner’s life indicates her dedication to this ideal. Warner’s valuation of “virtue and manners” over “wealth and birth” was likely a defensive stance, a standpoint generated through hardship during the course of her life.

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<sup>19</sup> Barnes, *States of Sympathy*, x-xi, 76.

<sup>20</sup> Foster, *Susan and Anna Warner*, 60; see also Walker, “Warner, Susan Bogert.” (*Queechy*’s American protagonist, Fleda Ringgan, although a poor orphan, nevertheless exhibits natural taste, devotion to study, and politesse. Fleda also becomes the agent of converting an English gentleman to Christianity, and she later marries him and moves to his estate.)

Susan Bogert Warner was born in 1819 to New York lawyer Henry Whiting Warner and Anna Marsh Bartlett.<sup>21</sup> She grew up in “modest luxury” with her little sister Anna in the family’s New York City mansion at 10 St. Mark’s Place<sup>22</sup>; she studied Italian and music under private tutors and took dancing lessons with Julia Ward (Howe). After their 1836 purchase of Constitution Island (then Martelaer’s Island) near West Point, the family summered in the old farmhouse there. Henry Warner’s brother, Reverend Thomas Warner, the chaplain of West Point, recommended the purchase and even drew up “grandiose plans” for a country home with gardens.<sup>23</sup> After the Panic of 1837 and a series of bad financial decisions, however, Henry Warner had to revise the plans. He settled for adding a modest wing to the colonial structure<sup>24</sup> as his wealth (through investments and law practice) dwindled.<sup>25</sup> Soon, necessity forced a retrenchment through selling the St. Mark’s Place mansion and moving to the Island house, called Wood Crag, year-round.<sup>26</sup> The family, including Henry Warner, his sister “Aunt Fanny,” Susan, and Anna, brought with them the domestic furnishings from the New York house: “expensive carpets, curtains, and furniture—all in crimson or crimson and drab—that exactly reflected, like the paintings which lined the wall, the best taste of the day.”<sup>27</sup>

Foreclosures and legal entanglements further damaged the family’s financial

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<sup>21</sup> Walker, “Warner, Susan Bogert”; Putnam, “The Warner Sisters,” 22. Distant Warner relations include Jonathan Warner of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, associated by marriage to the Wentworth family of royal governors; his brick Portsmouth house, circa 1716, is a Registered National Historic Landmark (Robinson, “The Warners of Constitution Island,” 9). Anna Marsh Bartlett died in 1826, and Henry’s sister Fanny then managed the household (Weiss, “Biography,” 331).

<sup>22</sup> Overmyer, “Hudson River Bluestockings,” 139; Walker, “Warner, Susan Bogert.”

<sup>23</sup> Overmyer, “Hudson River Bluestockings,” 139.

<sup>24</sup> Overmyer, “Hudson River Bluestockings,” 139.

<sup>25</sup> Putnam, “The Warner Sisters,” 23.

<sup>26</sup> Overmyer, “Hudson River Bluestockings,” 139.

<sup>27</sup> Foster, *Susan and Anna Warner*, 57-58; for further description, see Robinson, “The Warners of Constitution Island,” 10.

stability, and a sheriff's sale was used to settle the debts.<sup>28</sup> The family lost "many of its possessions, including a piano and some valuable engravings,"<sup>29</sup> but managed to recover their Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington.<sup>30</sup>

Susan and Anna Warner, much like Susan's protagonist Ellen, had to learn the practical matters of domestic economy in order to cope with their reduced circumstances. Anna Warner noted, "'from dainty silks and laces we came down to calicoes, fashioned by our own fingers.'"<sup>31</sup> The girls gardened, churned, cooked, sewed, and ironed; they chopped firewood, too.<sup>32</sup> But the girls also plotted ideas to bring in money. Anna Warner developed *Robinson Crusoe's Farmyard*, "a natural history game" played with cards hand-water-colored at home by the sisters,<sup>33</sup> and Susan Warner drew on her consistent childhood activity of "talk[ing] stories"<sup>34</sup> to begin the novel that was to become *The Wide, Wide World*.

Ironically, Warner's manuscript was very nearly a bust. Warner worked on the novel throughout 1848 and 1849 and submitted the work to publishers early in 1850.<sup>35</sup> A reader at Harper's famously scrawled "Fudge" on the manuscript, but Warner was persistent.<sup>36</sup> The novel next went to Putnam's, where internal reviewers

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<sup>28</sup> Anna Warner, *Susan Warner ("Elizabeth Wetherell")*, 278.

<sup>29</sup> Williams, "Widening the World," 566; In "Hudson River Bluestockings," Overmyer itemizes a "Domenichino 'St. Cecelia,'" other "prints and paintings" as well as books, "satinwood chairs and inlaid tables, rugs, china and silverware" (144).

<sup>30</sup> Robinson, "The Warners of Constitution Island," 10. Robinson explains that the portrait was being held, at another location, as security for a loan; the holder, "a family friend," eventually returned the portrait "in gratitude for his pleasure in reading her book [Susan's *The Wide, Wide World*]" (10). The Warners never profited financially from the portrait; Anna Warner donated the painting to West Point (10; see also Overmyer, "Hudson River Bluestockings," 144).

<sup>31</sup> Anna Warner qtd. in Robinson, "The Warners of Constitution Island," 10.

<sup>32</sup> Overmyer, "The Warner Sisters," 140; Walker, "Warner, Susan Bogert."

<sup>33</sup> Williams, "Widening the World," 566; Anna Warner, *Susan Warner ("Elizabeth Wetherell")*, 279.

<sup>34</sup> Warner, *Many Things Take My Time*, 142.

<sup>35</sup> Putnam, "The Warner Sisters," 25.

<sup>36</sup> Overmyer, "The Warner Sisters," 140.

noted her “good character studies” but found the novel “not dramatic,” “in no way sensational,” and “very long.”<sup>37</sup> Fortunately for Warner, publisher George Palmer Putnam’s mother also read the manuscript and urged its publication. The book appeared in December of 1850<sup>38</sup> although Warner did not feel its monetary effects till much later. As late as November of 1850 she claimed to be “seriously debating the question of a governess’s place” and feeling grateful that the family had sustained a break-in, thus earning them fifty dollars in restitution which provided some much-needed ready cash.<sup>39</sup> The Warners rented the upstairs of their Constitution Island home but, in spite of their economy, noted with alarm the final two sticks of wood, the last spermaceti candle, and the final two pounds of brown sugar.<sup>40</sup>

Although Warner never achieved through her writing the wealth she had known as a child, she and her sister did profit from their literary efforts. They earned enough to support their Constitution Island establishment and to winter in warmer homes in New York City and Highland Falls (also known as Buttermilk Falls). In addition, their winter sojourns as well as their friendship with publisher George Palmer Putnam widened their literary acquaintance, enabling them to meet William Makepeace Thackeray and James Russell Lowell, for instance. During the course of their careers, they also met Phoebe and Alice Cary, Cyrus W. Field, Nathaniel Parker Willis, Presbyterian minister and author Edward Payson Roe, author and illustrator Benson John Lossing (who painted scenes from Shaker life), Fanny

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<sup>37</sup> Putnam, “The Warner Sisters,” 25.

<sup>38</sup> Overmyer, “The Warner Sisters,” 140-141.

<sup>39</sup> Warner, “*Many Things Take My Time*,” 253, 262.

<sup>40</sup> Warner, “*Many Things Take My Time*,” 267.

Kemble, and Catharine Sedgwick.<sup>41</sup> But their acquaintances must have been equally impressed with the Warners. First, Susan and Anna Warner published over seventy works, including fifteen written collaboratively.<sup>42</sup> Second, *The Wide, Wide World's* popularity, as reflected by copies sold, was second only to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).<sup>43</sup>

*The Wide, Wide World* was "a smash hit," going through sixty-seven printings by 1925 (and, reportedly, 500,000 copies by 1860),<sup>44</sup> and it proved Warner's best and most enduring method of Christian and textile proselytization. One fan recounted in an 1867 letter her discovery of the novel even in a remote Swiss chalet; another described hearing the novel read in a Chinese school.<sup>45</sup> Warner continued writing and publishing throughout her life, but she also took an active interest in practical Christianity. For instance, after 1875, she initiated a Sunday afternoon Bible study group for West Point cadets.<sup>46</sup> Her group involved an ever-changing membership of Christian believers as well as the unconverted. She maintained an extensive correspondence with cadets and graduates, concerning their moral and spiritual states. One married graduate thanked her for her guidance and assured her of his obedience: "I can say that I have no desire at all to dance and would take very small pains to see the theatre at any time and intend to favor neither."<sup>47</sup>

Another student (later an assistant secretary to the U.S. Treasury) confessed his

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<sup>41</sup> Stokes, *Letters and Memories*, 33; Robinson, "The Warners of Constitution Island," 11; Overmyer, "The Warner Sisters," 150.

<sup>42</sup> Overmyer, "The Warner Sisters," 148; Putnam, "The Warner Sisters," 29.

<sup>43</sup> Warner, "The Author of 'The Wide, Wide, World' [sic on commas], 8.

<sup>44</sup> Putnam, "The Warner Sisters," 42-43; Stokes, *Letters and Memories*, 26; "To the Editor of The British Weekly."

<sup>45</sup> Ching, Letter to Miss Warner, 27 Nov 1867; Denison, Letter to Miss Warner, 18 Feb 1861.

<sup>46</sup> Putnam, "The Warner Sisters," 32.

<sup>47</sup> Catlin, E.H. Letter to Miss Warner. 4 May 1882.



religious struggles: "But, to be candid, I never feel more discouraged than when attempting to understand the Bible. Every word provokes some dissenting thought."<sup>48</sup> Warner's proselytizing efforts were not limited to the Academy, however. She also, apparently, assisted Mary E.D. Ainslie, a missionary's wife in Minnesota, to procure copies of *The Wide, Wide World*<sup>49</sup> as well as "striped cotton shirting" for the needy Sabbath School students there.<sup>50</sup> Warner also saved newsletters from Ainslie in which the missionary pled for "bits of velvet, upholsterers' rep, and bright scraps of delaine and silk" with which Native American (Dakota) women produced fancy work to sell in support of a Plains mission. Ainslie wrote, "Do, please, leave piecing those log-cabin quilts, and instead, doing up those bits of silk and velvet in wee bit packages, such as the mail will take, just send them to the ladies in charge at the different stations, for these Indian women to manufacture into mission money. And don't forget to put the postage stamp on, fast and firm, so that said package will go all right."<sup>51</sup> Warner's theology recognizes the civilizing, even converting, powers of textiles.

### **Replicating Textile Domesticity in *The Wide, Wide World***

By studying the domestic spaces and textile goods in *The Wide, Wide World*, I propose to show how Warner outlines a nearly perfect pattern of a white, Protestant, middle-class ideology of domesticity through textile practices. This particular presentation of domesticity seems "perfect" or normative only because it is

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<sup>48</sup> Crosby, Letter to Miss Warner. 29 Oct 1881.

<sup>49</sup> Ainslie, Letter to Susan Warner. 15 Jan 1879.

<sup>50</sup> Ainslie, Letter to Susan Warner. 4 Feb 1879.

<sup>51</sup> Ainslie, "The Dakota Mission," 410.

a product of the dominant literary culture. Nina Baym, in "Rewriting the Scribbling Women," warns against reading the New England, or, here, northeastern, literary subculture as applicable to all women.<sup>52</sup> The novel, however, yields one interpretation of how the ideology of domesticity produces or is produced by physical space and its goods. The novel's domestic spaces and goods (particularly those of Ellen Montgomery) serve utilitarian purposes but also "emotional and, here, even social functions, representing the tenets of middle-class life—its values, refinements, and customs."<sup>53</sup> In particular, textile furnishings, with their unique mutability and multiplicity of uses, effect and reflect ideology (a type of objectification I discuss later). I argue that the novel predicates domesticity on one's ability to appreciate textiles' refining properties. While critics have carefully unpacked protagonist Ellen Montgomery's writing desk, they have not yet inventoried the other refining goods that demarcate class affiliations (and disseminate refined practices) in the novel. Warner wholeheartedly endorses a hierarchy of domestic textiles in which the finest and most durable fabrics made of dear materials (such as linen, silk, and even wool, for instance, over cotton) promote refinement and moral uplift.

Scholarship concerning Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* often stakes out positions concerning the book's espousal of the "cult of domesticity" and its appeal to sentimentalism. *The Wide, Wide World* has become the battleground for

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<sup>52</sup> Baym explains, "Moreover, even when maintaining that women's writing expresses their experience in the subculture, we have tended to let writing by a group of New England born, protestant and middle class White women stand for all women. This is fair, to my mind, only if we acknowledge that we are talking not about 'the' female subculture, but about 'the' female *literary* subculture, a subculture in which few women participated and whose rules, as I've already argued, are not constitutive of life" (Baym, "Rewriting the Scribbling Women," 11). Beverly Voloshin reminds us that woman's fiction such as Warner's "female *Bildungsroman* betrays a class bias which prevents it from genuinely offering a new vision of women and social organization" (Voloshin, "The Limits of Domesticity," 299).

<sup>53</sup> Quay, "Homesickness in Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*," 45.

these related debates because of its very popularity. Biographer Edward Halsey Foster attributes to the Warners' novels espousal of an "ideal domesticity" such as outlined by social reformers such as Horace Bushnell or domestic handbook author Catharine Beecher, none of whom "reached an audience as huge as the Warners'."<sup>54</sup> Critics want to establish how nineteenth-century readers interpreted the notion of domesticity—with its corollary qualities (according to Welter) of submissiveness, piety, and purity—and the gendering of spheres attendant to a woman's dedication to the home.<sup>55</sup> Early twentieth-century critics of the novel such as Henry Nash Smith, Alexander Cowie, and, later, Barbara Welter, and Ann Douglas Wood view the novel as a conservative text rallying "an ethos of conformity"<sup>56</sup> through characters acting as "benign moral police."<sup>57</sup> Feminist critic Helen Waite Papashvily proposes that novels such as Warner's seek to overthrow patriarchal culture through subversive portrayals of independent women; Jane Tompkins defends women's novels for their attempts to "redefine the social order" by dignifying the power of the domestic woman to effect change.<sup>58</sup>

*The Wide, Wide World's* child protagonist, Ellen Montgomery, is Warner's model for women's power of social change. Ellen single-handedly converts to

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<sup>54</sup> Foster, *Susan and Anna Warner*, 32.

<sup>55</sup> See Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, xvii, for an outline of the discourse of domesticity, which included ideological emphasis on a home led by a "self-abnegating wife and mother" who provided "spiritual and civic" nurture.

<sup>56</sup> Smith qtd. in Voloshin, "A Historical Note on Women's Fiction," 819.

<sup>57</sup> Cowie qtd. in Kelley, "The Sentimentalists," 434.

<sup>58</sup> Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, xi. See also Foster & Simons, *What Katy Read*, 49; Trubey, "Imagined Revolution," 64-65. In "The Limits of Domesticity," Beverly Voloshin suggests that woman's fiction expressed conformity to the cult of domesticity but contrasted this gendered state against independent women (such as the orphan heroines in their young days) disengaged from male authority. In "The Sentimentalists," Mary Kelley argues that woman's fiction provided a "domestic dream" that provided a bulwark against the realities of deteriorating moral conditions in the nineteenth century (437). Joanne Dobson believes that woman's fiction, by showing the painful side of woman's lot, reveals the faultlines in a cult of domesticity ("The Hidden Hand").

Christianity two fellow characters (Nancy Vawse and Mr. Van Brunt) and, through her mother's and Alice Humphreys's tutelage, practices modest, even democratizing, textile refinements that can be instituted regardless of class or income.<sup>59</sup> Both recent and nineteenth-century critics, however, have expressed discomfort with Ellen's relationship with her "adopted brother" John Humphreys. Author and critic Caroline Kirkland, writing in 1853, muses, "It is hard to imagine Ellen slipping into the equality of wifery, from the childish reverence which she is represented as feeling, to the last moment, for him who as been for years her stern and almost gloomy teacher."<sup>60</sup> Indeed, the apt pupil Ellen seems in some ways a victim of John's indoctrination, a girl molded into a wife before realizing her own mind. In this more negative light, Ellen's lessons in domesticity take on the more ominous aspects of coercion rather than domestic freedom. Moreover, his control echoes notions of domestic "colonization" and "imperialism"—such as of her own body claimed by John as a private possession—suggested by Lori Merish, Laura Wexler, and Amy Kaplan.<sup>61</sup>

Our first view of *The Wide, Wide World's* ten-year-old Ellen Montgomery shows her engrossed in disciplining domestic objects and thus practicing learned domestic rituals. Living with her mother and father at Green's Hotel on South Street in New York City, Ellen imposes proprietary care and "hominess" on the

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<sup>59</sup> Warner seems sympathetic to Ellen's projects of reform. The novel adumbrates a future marriage between Ellen and the hero, John Humphreys; Miss Fortune Emerson, on the other hand, resistant to Ellen's domestic and spiritual entreaties, receives ever harsher portrayals in the novel. Warner derogates Miss Fortune's initial hardness by showing her later engaged in actual theft, an action seemingly unsupported by prior characterization.

<sup>60</sup> Kirkland, "Novels and Novelists," 116.

<sup>61</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 94; Wexler, *Tender Violence*, 67; Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," 184, 186.

apartment's parlor.<sup>62</sup> While her mother naps, Ellen assumes the tasks of domestic womanhood and tidies up the room after late afternoon visitors. She bustles about, speaking to herself and the objects she corrects,

'Do but see how those chairs are standing—one would think we had had a sewing-circle here—there, go back to your places,—that looks a little better; now these curtains must come down, and I may as well shut the shutters too; and now this table-cloth must be content to hang straight, and mamma's box and the books must lie in their places, and not all helter-skelter.'<sup>63</sup>

Her voice reenacts earlier training, bringing the domestic furnishings into alignment with her mother's precepts. For instance, unpeopled, movable chairs are usually placed against a wall to open the space of the room (for ease of sweeping and moving about) and to signal the close of a social gathering. Next Ellen draws the curtains and closes the shutters, closing the parlor from the world (making it private), insulating it against the cold and the eyes of passersby, shutting out the glaring reflections produced by windows separating a lighted parlor from a darkened street. The curtain fabric closes off the theater of the two women as seen in the blackened glass, the uncomfortable reflection of bodily presence and absence.<sup>64</sup> Mrs.

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<sup>62</sup> The word "homey" entered the English language in 1856. See also Watters, "A Power in the House," 194, for a discussion of parlor rituals in Alcott's *Little Women*.

<sup>63</sup> Warner, *The Wide, Wide World*, 10; hereafter cited in text.

<sup>64</sup> In *Seeing Through Clothes*, Anne Hollander studies the significance of apparel and drapery in art. She describes the various potentials of curtains, too: "They may divide large spaces into small sections, shut out drafts and light, and conceal the presence of anything that does not smell or make a noise. They can do all this in a conveniently temporary way, and then be folded back and made to reverse the same functions by permitting the passage of light and air, opening up large spaces, and revealing what has been hidden" (26). Beverly Gordon, in her study of "the conceptual conflation between women's bodies and domestic interiors" (281), particularly between 1875 and 1920, explains that the home assumed "a corporeal quality" (288) where draperies and furnishings were a form of

Montgomery, slowly succumbing to consumption, may imagine her own absence (and the absence of the feckless Captain Montgomery) in the window tableau, and Ellen unwittingly shuts this out. Curtains keep the outside world at bay.

Ellen then presumably tugs the tablecloth hem parallel to the floor. Her personification of the cloth as discontented makes overt the agency of the textile, its ability to affect Ellen as a subject. The tablecloth may represent to Ellen (recalling her mother's upper-class upbringing) a modicum of gentility as it masks the otherwise bare subsistence incumbent upon the wife and daughter of litigious Captain Montgomery. She heeds the rather arbitrary notion of a cloth's arrangement. The tablecloth, threatening to revolt, is drawn into conformity with Ellen's vision of how a tablecloth must hang, and it "must be content" with its lot. Critics of domesticity might see in the tablecloth a metaphor for Ellen's own gendered femininity, being brought into middle-class cultural conformity. Ellen finally returns her mother's work-box and books to their accustomed locations.

Ellen thus learns her own control of domestic space, her power to discipline objects, actions Judy Attfield calls containment, or "the management of personal space."<sup>65</sup> Goods left about "helter-skelter" are liable to misuse or damage; to Ellen and her mother, such a treatment of goods indicates a lack of reverence for their utility (use value) and affect (meaning or attached value). Pauline Garvey, in a material culture study of rearranging (rather than redecorating) homes, argues that rearrangement, even temporary, allows inhabitants to "contemplate and order

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homely dress: "Curtains were opened in the morning, much as the body was groomed and prepared for the day's activities. The same curtains were drawn in the evenings, when the lamps were lit and evening dress was put on" ("Woman's Domestic Body," 288).

<sup>65</sup> Attfield, *Wild Things*, 171.

emotional states.”<sup>66</sup> Ellen’s very “containment” of the household goods enables her to try on notions of domestic responsibility, to experiment with the aesthetic arrangement of space, and, symbolically, to exert control over the parlor much as she might wish to control her life. Because she sees her individual choices in her domestic arrangements, Ellen’s domestic work provides “an overt or latent sense of self which transcends an image of home as purely a presentational field.”<sup>67</sup> Ellen’s proprietary manipulation of goods establishes her subjectivity as a domestic woman.

Ellen’s self-coaching through her ritualized discipline of domestic objects demonstrates how middle-class domesticity is replicated. Her mother’s (and, later, Alice’s) indirect example as well as direct tuition provide a framework of domestic practice. Ellen’s “gradual process of inculcation” results in what Pierre Bourdieu labels “habitus,” “a set of *dispositions* that incline agents to act and react in certain ways. The dispositions generate practices, perceptions and attitudes which are ‘regular’ without being consciously co-ordinated or governed by any ‘rule.’”<sup>68</sup> Middle-class domestic ideology and textile practice thus become “second nature” to Ellen, both learned and inherent, and indefinitely replicable.<sup>69</sup>

Ellen’s need for education in middle-class, textile domesticity—both containment and consumption—is urgent. Mrs. Montgomery, both mother and mentor, is near death, and she feels the awesomeness of her responsibility. She coaches Ellen to differentiate among goods by assessing their constitutive properties; she assesses the fineness of the fabric’s weave and the readability of the

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<sup>66</sup> Garvey, “Organized Disorder,” 51.

<sup>67</sup> Garvey, “Organized Disorder,” 49.

<sup>68</sup> Thompson qtd. in Painter, “Pierre Bourdieu,” 242.

<sup>69</sup> Thompson qtd. in Painter, “Pierre Bourdieu,” 243.

Bible's print, for instance. Mrs. Montgomery's valuation of fine merinos or a suitable Bible shows her belief that some goods are better than others. She isolates and values the objects' properties, those properties she would like Ellen to appropriate. She believes that goods such as the sewing work-box will provoke Ellen to industry and tidiness. Mrs. Montgomery's theory of containment and consumption is, quite simply, a belief in the refining and elevating powers of goods, that is, "pious consumption." Lori Merish explains the term: "'refined' domestic artifacts would 'civilize' and 'socialize' persons and awaken 'higher' sentiments; such objects would seduce wayward individuals into the regenerative sociability of domesticity, and, by inspiring purified sentiments, could draw individuals to God."<sup>70</sup> Merish traces the origins of pious consumption to notions of sensibility articulated by Adam Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Smith argues that "the impressions of our own senses" enable us to imagine the sensations and sufferings of others. Scottish Enlightenment philosophers such as Smith countermanded exhortations to Spartan living popular during the Revolutionary period. Just as important as sympathizing with another's emotional state was developing a sensitivity to his physical state. Luxurious, refined goods made one's nerves alive to sensation and better able to sympathize with one's fellow men or women. Luxury and the consumption of high-quality goods, according to Merish, lead to "the favorable culmination of 'civilization,' human morality, and social advance."<sup>71</sup> In the nineteenth century, the New England Congregational clergyman Timothy Dwight argued,

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<sup>70</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 90.

<sup>71</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 34; see also Clark, *The American Family Home*, 21-22.



'The perception of beauty and deformity, of refinement and grossness, of decency and vulgarity, of propriety and indecorum, is the first thing which influences man to escape from a groveling, brutish character; a character in which morality is effectually chilled, or absolutely frozen. In most persons, this perception is awakened by what may be called the exterior of society, particularly by the mode of building.'<sup>72</sup>

Refining goods both effected and reflected refinement. Nineteenth-century figures such as Catharine Beecher, Horace Bushnell, and architect A.J. Downing suggested that attractive and comfortable furnishings could influence character by evoking an appreciation for the beautiful and for home values such as family affection and spirituality. Bushnell "advised parents to create pleasant surroundings, to make 'the house no mere prison, but a place of attraction.' To do so would help to shape the child's character throughout the week, but especially on Sunday."<sup>73</sup> By a mysterious process of appropriation, smooth, well-made goods and goods endowed with particular associations (such as gifts or keepsakes) "induced noble sentiments" and invited contemplation of aesthetic, moral, and spiritual concerns.<sup>74</sup> By selecting goods whose isolated properties (such as smoothness or rarity) they valued, people could thereby transfer these mirrored values into their own self-concepts.

Moreover, fine-quality goods reflected one's condition in society. Material culture theorist Jules David Prown argues persuasively for the semiotic ability of

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<sup>72</sup> Dwight qtd. in Loudon, *Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm, and Villa Architecture*, 3.

<sup>73</sup> Handlin, *The American Home*, 10.

<sup>74</sup> Handlin, *The American Home*, 16; Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 90. In *The Refinement of America*, Richard Bushman explains that "As articulated by Edmund Burke, smooth and flowing surfaces went beyond clothing and personality to a much more general aesthetic. As a young man trying to distinguish the qualities of beauty, he identified smoothness as an essential trait of all beautiful things" (72).

goods to communicate: "The underlying premise is that human-made objects reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individuals who commissioned, fabricated, purchased, or used them, and, by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which these individuals belonged."<sup>75</sup>

The display of refined goods asserted one's commitment to other qualities and values often bundled with refinement: taste, education, spirituality, morality and fairness, reason.<sup>76</sup> Textiles' multiple, simultaneous properties make them ideal symbols. Cultural historian Richard Bushman explains how the coarseness or fineness of textiles came to be associated with human qualities:

The etymology of the word 'coarse' suggests that the physical quality was linked to broader cultural values. [...] The feel of coarse cloth was associated with the lower ranks of society and with rude personal traits. [...] By the same token, 'polished' and 'polite' linked smooth fabric with well-finished persons suggests that fabrics became metaphors for personality. In paying higher prices for smooth fabrics, the gentry wished to reflect in their clothing the personal qualities they sought in their conduct.<sup>77</sup>

Ellen's own choice of goods suggests her own power to form her subjectivity; she and her mother believe that one's conscious choices help to form and guide the development of one's character.

Other theorists such as Veblen, Baudrillard, and Simon Bronner have studied consumption as a marker of class, as a means of personal expression, or as a way

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<sup>75</sup> Prown, "The Truth of Material Culture," 11; see also Prown, "Mind in Matter," 22.

<sup>76</sup> Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 185.

<sup>77</sup> Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 72.

of coping with shifting cultural values.<sup>78</sup> But why was it desirable to have goods that effected and reflected refinement?

Refinement stabilized democracy.<sup>79</sup> Catharine Beecher claims, "And there is nothing which would so effectually remove prejudice against our democratic institutions, as the general cultivation of good-breeding in the domestic circle."<sup>80</sup> Unrefined people, according to popular literature, stubbornly resisted the "democratization of taste" afforded by mass-produced domestic goods and new home plans designed for various classes of consumers.<sup>81</sup> They eschewed the niceties of social courtesies, public and private spatial divisions within homes, and specialized domestic goods. In popular literature of the frontier, their resistance implied a threat to middle-class civilization and, instead, a commitment to low amusements, ugly domestic arrangements equated with poor character, "wrong" political party affiliations, and suspect morals. Author and editor Caroline Kirkland, in her 1844 narrative *Forest Life*, reported a speech that could have been uttered by Warner's Miss Fortune Emerson:

'Respect!' he exclaimed; 'why should I show more respect to any man than he does to me? Because he wears a finer coat? His coat don't do me any good. Does he pay his taxes any better than I do? Is he any kinder to his family? Does he act more honestly by his neighbors? Will he have a higher place in heaven than I shall? Show me the man that's a *better* man than I am, and you'll see if I don't treat him with

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<sup>78</sup> Bronner, "Reading Consumer Culture," 14.

<sup>79</sup> See Barnes, *States of Sympathy*, and Brown, *Domestic Individualism*, on notions of the sentimental in relation to nation.

<sup>80</sup> Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 126.

<sup>81</sup> Sweeting, *Reading Houses and Building Books*, 42.

respect! But to fawn and cringe before a fellow-critter because he's got more money than I have, is agin my principles. I sha'n't help to blow up nobody's pride.'<sup>82</sup>

The man's logic is challenged by another character, Mr. Sibthorpe, with whom Kirkland is in obvious sympathy. Mr. Sibthorpe urges the man to cast off his stubborn pride in order to appreciate the true merit of the refined individual, a natural hierarchy of "different grades in society"<sup>83</sup>—in fact, Warner's "aristocracy of virtue and manners." Of course, these portrayals were both biased and incomplete. Nevertheless, they bolstered the missionizing of white, middle-class domestic ideology.

### **Consuming Goods and Guiding Domestic Practice**

While Ellen has mastered the art of domestic containment, she is sadly lacking in knowledge of consumption. This ignorance of consumption, moreover, is dangerous. At stake is her very ability to establish a middle-class domestic household and to navigate the dangers of Spartan domesticity and excessive consumption that threaten national character. Ellen must avoid becoming the dupe of avaricious salesclerks; she must moderate her consumption so as to avoid gluttony; she must learn to assess the value of different qualities of goods. Ellen accompanies her mother to purchase a Bible, writing desk, dressing-box, and work-box for her sojourn in the country. Mrs. Montgomery, weakened by her illness, nevertheless shows great patience in allowing her daughter to practice the niceties

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<sup>82</sup> Kirkland, *Forest Life*, I: 204.

<sup>83</sup> Kirkland, *Forest Life*, I: 204.

of consumption. In these oft-discussed scenes, Ellen reveals herself a novice at distinguishing between the goods available in an industrialized society. Each new store is a “fairy-land” (32) of seemingly magical goods she has only imagined before. She frankly covets the Bibles, “large, small, and middle-sized; black, blue, purple, and red; gilt and not gilt; clasp and no clasp” (30). When she chooses a Domesday-sized tome, her mother coyly suggests that it would be quite weighty on one’s lap. Ellen marvels at the Bible’s inconvenience, “I wonder I didn’t think of it. I might have known that myself” (31). And even though Mrs. Montgomery tells Ellen, “Judge for yourself; I think you are old enough,” she still offers warnings about the smallness of the type or the inconvenience of the size (31). Ultimately, “Ellen had lost the power of judging amidst so many tempting objects,” and Mrs. Montgomery narrows the field to three Bible candidates (31). Ellen is very nearly overwhelmed by the goods, but her shopping ritual dispels her enchantment with them. She is newly attuned to the uses of goods.

The Bible and the work-box, in particular, are goods that initiate Ellen’s growth to domestic womanhood. The Bible of course is a manual for spiritual aspiration and self-abnegation; the work-box provides the means for Ellen to carry out her textile-related duties of sewing and mending. Mrs. Montgomery explains to Ellen,

‘I wish to have the comfort of thinking, when I am away, that I have left you with everything necessary to the keeping up of good habits,— everything that will make them pleasant and easy. I wish you to be always neat, and tidy, and industrious; depending upon others as little

as possible; and careful to improve yourself by every means, and especially by writing to me. I will leave you no excuse, Ellen for failing in any of these duties.' (31-32)

Each item that they purchase—the Bible, the work-box, the writing desk, the dressing-box—serves as a reminder of the women's duties to each other and to others. Mrs. Montgomery warns Ellen that her gifts “will serve as reminders” against dereliction of duty: “If you fail to send me letters, or if those you send are not what they ought to be, I think the desk will cry shame upon you. And if you ever go an hour with a hole in your stocking, or a tear in your dress, or a string off your petticoat, I hope the sight of your work-box will make you blush” (37). Sara Quay explains how such objects enter a string of associations among people, settings, and objects by which “an object can stand as a tangible marker of an intangible connection; it recalls both the memory of what is absent and the emotions connected with it.”<sup>84</sup> These objects—particularly textile-related objects such as the work-box and the textile bedding and garments which are so intimately tangible—assuage the anxieties of separation and loss that Ellen confronts throughout the novel.<sup>85</sup> Here,

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<sup>84</sup> Quay, “Homesickness in Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*,” 42. Quay explains, “In a culture preoccupied with the power of reading, from novels, magazines, and manuals, to phrenological bumps and physiological characteristics, it is not surprising that objects too should be viewed as readable” (42).

<sup>85</sup> Nancy Schnog, Joanne Dobson, Ronald J. Zboray & Mary Saracino Zboray, Grace Ann Hovet & Theodore R. Hovet, and Sara Quay have all studied the strategies for coping with separation and loss presented in nineteenth-century “sentimental” literature such as Warner's. Schnog focuses on the metonymy of the divine for the absent mother; Hovet and Hovet identify as Christocentrism this means of replacing an absent mother with a personal, parental Jesus; Dobson identifies the keepsake as a means of connection bridging separation; Zboray and Zboray discuss the abilities of books to maintain affectional memory; Sara Quay studies the investment of objects with emotion as a remedy for nostalgia, the lost home.

the desk and the work-box are agents in the transformation of Ellen as a subject; they change her practice and discipline her behavior as a domestic woman.<sup>86</sup>

Current material culture theorists have theorized objects as more than commodity fetishes; the objects do indeed have power, but (as Marx also argued) it is neither inherent nor magical. In fact, "cultural objects externalize values and meaning embedded in social processes."<sup>87</sup> Daniel Miller calls this process "objectification" by which the creation of form or, I would argue, selection and arrangement of objects "creates consciousness [...] and thereby transforms both form and the self-consciousness."<sup>88</sup> In short, Miller's account of objectification, as opposed to Marx's, attempts to redeem the object as a non-commodity,<sup>89</sup> instead, the object is engaged in a continual dialectical relationship with the subject. Although the work-box may be produced (here, selected) by Ellen, it also helps to produce her by contributing to her sense of subjectivity and guiding her future practice.<sup>90</sup> In particular, Ellen and her mother's careful process of selection of a work-box evokes new duties and associations for Ellen. Her act of selection produces in her new obligations and feelings about her role as a domestic woman. Thus, subjects and objects are mutually constitutive.

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<sup>86</sup> Latour cited in Attfield, *Wild Things*, 148. In Warner's final, unpublished chapter in which Ellen returns to the United States as John Humphreys's wife, Ellen surveys the study carefully furnished and arranged for her and says, "But indeed I should be inexcusable if I could be unfaithful to duty here" (576).

<sup>87</sup> Myers, "Introduction: The Empire of Things," 20.

<sup>88</sup> Miller, "Materiality: An Introduction," 9. See Arnould's review, "*Material Culture and Mass Consumption*," 568-569, for further discussion of Miller's notion of objectification.

<sup>89</sup> Arnould, "*Material Culture and Mass Consumption*," 569.

<sup>90</sup> Miller "Materiality: An Introduction" 38.

Textiles and other domestic goods, in fact, help a consumer to create herself, both in relation to others and in her own sense of identification.<sup>91</sup> First, for instance, Ellen's appreciation for soft, durable merino enables her to connect her own appreciation with her mother's. When she learns to identify good-quality textiles, she claims her mother's legacy; they share an affinity for particular textile qualities. When a clerk challenges Ellen's knowledge of merinos, he unknowingly challenges Mrs. Montgomery's sensibility, and Ellen reacts with a feeling of revulsion and disgust for the clerk's rudeness and disrespect. Second, Ellen values the merino for its softness, fineness, somber color (grey or brown), and durability. These fabric qualities might also signify qualities Ellen is trying to achieve in her own life, a type of appropriation. She cultivates a softness or sympathy for rather lugubrious objects of pity, such as the deformed boy Billy whom she spies from her back window at Southing Street, and for the less sympathetic Aunt Fortune. She associates quality and durability with the ability to foster and defend her faith against its challengers; the somber colors reflect her own grave happiness which the Lindsays find very un-girl-like.

Perhaps the most important act of consumption, though, involves the purchase and use of textiles—those goods with which people are most intimate and most identified. When her own illness prevents her modeling the practice, Mrs. Montgomery reluctantly prepares Ellen's entry into domestic textile consumption, enacted in the city's clerk-infested waters of St. Clair and Fleury's department store. Ellen begs to go buy the merino wool cloth she will need for a dress during her time away from her mother, but Mrs. Montgomery demurs. She hesitates, "I don't doubt

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<sup>91</sup> See Crang & Thrift, "Introduction," 9.



you would if goodwill only were wanting; but a great deal of skill and experience is necessary for a shopper, and what would you do without either?" (44). After some consideration, Mrs. Montgomery accelerates Ellen's domestic education and locates a swatch of "good" merino, perhaps from her scrap basket or the hem of a dress. Ellen runs the pattern between her fingers, feeling the soft, fine, durable wool weave. Anything thicker, scratchier, or coarser is inappropriate. Here, Ellen hones her sensibility to comfort and luxury. And carrying the swatch before her—alive to its properties—Ellen enters the fray.

Once inside St. Clair and Fleury's, Ellen is buffeted by the eddies of commerce swirling about her. An old man tows her safely to shore at the merino counter where she struggles to gain the attention of the uncouth attendant Saunders. Saunders attempts to cheat her, quoting inflated prices for the fabric and trying to palm off the low-quality merchandise. But Ellen is not taken in. She points to merinos that she can see are of better color and quality than the ones he has shown. Reluctantly, Saunders pulls down a bolt of cloth and tumbles it about in front of her. Ellen notes the richness of color and feels the soft thickness of material: "It was a fine and beautiful piece, very different from those he had showed her at first. Even Ellen could see that, and fumbling for her little pattern of merino, she compared it with the piece. They agreed perfectly as to fineness" (47). Ellen confirms her judgment by comparison, relying on her senses. Although she can identify the proper fabric, she cannot necessarily purchase it. Saunders pulls it away and pads the price, eager to return to his voracious mates and to denigrate the sensibilities of his young customer. Saunders sniggers to his pals, "Why, I've been

here this half hour showing cloths to a child that doesn't know merino from a sheep's back'" (48). He is wrong, of course, and knows it. He has failed to dupe a ten-year-old girl with his shoddy merinos. His only power, then, lies in withholding what she wants.

Ellen avoids the snare of cheap merino, but she confronts the dangers of a market economy which challenges her practices of domestic consumption. Her failure to bargain for the good-quality material on her own shows that her domestic training is not complete. She must still learn how to negotiate the traps of the marketplace, the sharks who would prevent her textile purchases and thus negatively affect her domestic space. She requires adult assistance to meet the clerk's challenges head on. A "kind old gentleman" valiantly takes her part, rousing the brash clerks and exposing Sauders's rudeness and prejudicial pricing. He even procures swatches of the new merinos for her to show her mother. He acts as Ellen's benefactor by purchasing her "a nice warm hood, or quilted bonnet. It was of dark blue silk, well made and pretty" (52). She thus returns home with grey and brown merinos, the new hood, and "nankeen for a coat" (51).

The shared textile activity—here, purchasing—forges an intimacy between Ellen and the old gentleman that will forever mark the merinos, hood, and nankeen as reminders of his kindness. He becomes a surrogate father of sorts, helping with domestic purchases in a way that Captain Montgomery has proven himself unable or unwilling to do (Mrs. Montgomery says, "'besides, he knows nothing at all about shopping for me; he would be sure to bring me exactly what I do not want. I tried that once'" [43]) and providing salutary foodstuffs such as grapes and woodcocks

from his own table. The nankeen, purchased by the spontaneous generosity of the old gentleman, is a plain woven or twill cotton cloth usually “dyed a yellowish drab or buff color.”<sup>92</sup> It is a sturdy, wind-resistant cloth. But beyond the qualities of its texture, color, and garment potential, the nankeen also carries associations of its purchaser. It will provide literal protection from the elements, but it will also remind Ellen of the old gentleman’s aegis in St. Clair and Fleury’s.

Textiles carry such strong associations—from the labor invested in them, their use in memorable occasions, their intimacy to daily life—that they often serve as metonyms for absent figures. When Mrs. Montgomery must pack Ellen’s things for the trip to the country, she handles them with reverence, lavishing her love on these little textiles instead of the daughter she must not wake. Again, each textile is handled deliberately, as with a ritual, or with what Warner calls “love’s last act” (60).

Mrs. Montgomery

first laid out all that Ellen would need to wear,—the dark merino, the new nankeen coat, the white bonnet, the clean frill that her own hands had done up, the little gloves and shoes, and all the etceteras, with the thoughtfulness and the carefulness of love; but it went through and through her heart that it was the very last time a mother’s fingers would ever be busy in arranging or preparing Ellen’s attire; the very last time she would ever see or touch even the little inanimate things that belonged to her. (59)

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<sup>92</sup> Carmichael, Linton, & Price, “Nankeen,” 230.

The association between the textile garments and the wearer is extraordinarily strong.<sup>93</sup> And, by association, the maker of the garments (largely Mrs. Montgomery) who has invested her labor in the goods as well as her love and care establishes a relationship with the wearer.

### **Defining a Continuum of Textile Refinement**

The textility of textiles—their ability to retain warmth, abrade the skin,<sup>94</sup> cushion a seat, close off space, convey personal mood or taste—makes them the crucial factor in establishing the “attractive” home described by Bushnell and others. By the time of Warner’s novel in 1850, factory-made textiles produced by American mills formed a lexicon by which home decorators could write their domestic aspirations.<sup>95</sup> Mass production of textiles by improved technologies made fabrics more widely available and simultaneously less expensive.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, imitative technologies enabled the production of fabrics that had all the qualities of cheaper fabrics distinguished by the scarcity and expense of their materials and production. For example, velvet, originally made entirely of silk, became available with “cotton grounds” which reduced its cost and increased its availability to consumers of middling incomes.<sup>97</sup> Refining textiles thus became available to people at widely varying income levels.

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<sup>93</sup> See Attfield, *Wild Things*, 124.

<sup>94</sup> Beecher, in *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, makes a dramatic claim for flannel: “They [flannels] give a healthy action to the skin, and thus enable it to resist the operation of unhealthy miasms” (96).

<sup>95</sup> In *Culture and Comfort*, Katherine Grier explains, “The expanding universe of available consumer goods was like the universe of words available in a language” (12). See also chapter six (this volume) for a fuller history of the New England textile industry.

<sup>96</sup> Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 15.

<sup>97</sup> Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 17.

Refinement was not an uncontroversial practice. Refinement suggested, to early Protestants, for example, an unwholesome worldliness—works over faith.<sup>98</sup> Aspirations to gentility and refinement had their origins in Europe's royal cultures which seemed suspect to members of the American republic. Moreover, not all people aspired to the refinement offered by new textiles, a refinement associated with a broader sense of genteel conduct. Richard Bushman identifies competing attitudes toward gentility as an opposition of city versus country. Certainly, not all city residents aspired to gentility and not all country people spurned it. In short, "More than an objective measure of reality, city and country were a cultural and social polarity in a mental geography. The words were categories of a simple but useful vernacular sociology. Fashion, refinement, and excitement were at one pole, and simplicity, rudeness, and torpor at the other. City and country represented the extremes of two contrasting ways of life."<sup>99</sup> These "city" and "country" attitudes toward domestic textiles form a major element of conflict in Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, particularly between Ellen's home with the Humphreyses and her home with Aunt Fortune. Ellen must consistently defend her own appreciation of refined textiles and goods; she must mediate between the ascetic, the comfortable, and the wasteful.

More specifically, the city/country continuum parallels one of textile refinement versus Spartan republicanism.<sup>100</sup> Notions of pious textile consumption, inspired by aspirations to social and spiritual refinement, competed against earlier traditions of "orthodox Protestant[ism]" and "civic humanis[m]" as well as concerns

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<sup>98</sup> Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 193, 181-203.

<sup>99</sup> Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 353-354.

<sup>100</sup> See Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 41.

over imbalances of trade.<sup>101</sup> These concerns were gradually swept away with the growth of architectural pattern books, etiquette manuals, and commercial production of goods making refinement available across incomes, races, genders, and geographic areas. The city/country or refined/Spartan divides were also visible in evolving domestic handbooks. A contrast of Lydia Maria Child's 1829 domestic manual, which embodies the earlier domestic ideal of Spartan republicanism, and the works of Catharine Beecher (1841) and Andrew Jackson Downing (1850) reveals the shifting practices of domesticity. Beecher herself distinguishes mid-nineteenth-century domestic ideology (focused on "feeling" and sensibility that emphasizes maternal nurture within refining homes) from "country" domestic attitudes based in a Puritan aesthetic. She recalls of the United States's Puritan ancestors:

The sufferings they were called to endure, the subduing of those gentler feelings which bind us to country, kindred, and home, and the constant subordination of the passions to stern principle, induced characters of great firmness and self-control. They gave up the comforts and refinements of a civilized country, and came as pilgrims to a hard soil, a cold clime, and a heathen shore. They were constantly called to encounter danger, privations, sickness, loneliness, and death; and all these, their religion taught them to meet with calmness, fortitude, and submission. And thus it became the custom

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<sup>101</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 34; Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 187, 194.

and habit of the whole mass, to repress, rather than to encourage, the expression of feeling.<sup>102</sup>

Presumably, the new abundance of goods—as opposed to privation—encouraged a sense of national and domestic stability and improved character and material expression through refining furnishings.

Susan Warner, in *The Wide, Wide World*, offers varying patterns of consumption and domestic furnishing—from “city” to “country.” As Ellen rumbles along, enthroned in the oxcart, on her journey to her Aunt Fortune Emerson’s, she evaluates each house she passes: “The houses were very scattered; in the whole way they passed but few. Ellen’s heart regularly began to beat when they came in sight of one, and ‘I wonder if that is aunt Fortune’s house!’—‘perhaps it is!’—or, ‘I hope it is not!’ were the thoughts that rose in her mind” (95-96). Her reactions to the houses suggest that she has some internal rubric by which she gauges houses. Some have qualities she values; others do not. She envisions the types of lives that must be lived in the houses; she makes judgments about the interior from the exterior. While she never articulates her rubric except through her raptures and disappointments with domestic accoutrements, she runs firmly in the middle-class aesthetic espoused by popular authors such as Andrew Jackson Downing and Alexander Jackson Davis, author of *Rural Residences* (1837).

Andrew Jackson Downing’s *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850) argues, “[W]e believe much of the character of every man may be read in his house.”<sup>103</sup> Downing, who produced one of the 188 architectural handbooks

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<sup>102</sup> Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 121.

<sup>103</sup> Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses*, 25.

published in the United States between 1797 and 1860, was an architect and landscape designer.<sup>104</sup> Downing offered a philosophy of architecture that claimed the “moral influence” of domestic space.<sup>105</sup> He was what Adam W. Sweeting, in *Reading Houses and Building Books* (1996), labeled a “Genteel Romantic” who believed in the power of tasteful furnishing and specialized object usages to effect sensibility and morality. Sweeting explains, “Through a combination of piety, good manners, and general bonhomie [Downing and others] hoped to civilize the prevailing commercial culture, to smooth out the nation’s rough edges.”<sup>106</sup>

One of the nation’s “rough edges” appeared in Warner’s fictional portrayal of Miss Fortune Emerson’s decidedly “country,” Spartan farmhouse. Unlike cottages in Downing’s illustrative plates, it has no vines climbing a trellis. It is not charming or refined. It is unpainted and raw, inside (except for the gleaming buttery) and out. To Ellen, the unpainted woodwork suggests a rawness, a lack of refinement that allows the decay of wood into a drab, non-white. Again, the “light-brown colour” indicates that no hand has mediated the move of the wood from outside to in—no varnish, no paint, no preservative. Domestic environmentalists such as Richard Brown advocated the use of color in interior paint and textile decoration in 1842:

Now colour is capable of producing the most important effect upon the mind. It gives character to the hall, the staircase, and the drawing-room, effectually calls the imagination into play; requires no previous study to render its effects to be deeply felt by the uneducated, and the

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1. <sup>104</sup> Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 243; Sweeting, *Reading Houses and Building Books*,  
<sup>105</sup> Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses*, xix.  
<sup>106</sup> Sweeting, *Reading Houses and Building Books*, 9.



refined mind. It acts upon the feelings by sensations either sublime, cheerful, or gloomy.<sup>107</sup>

Aunt Fortune's house, not purposely colored at all, suggests an indifference to its inhabitants and recalls colonial-era hardships and domestic practices. Its bareness and drabness—it boasts neither carpets nor cushioned easy chairs for lounging—discourages leisure, comfort, and sociality. It is made for utility and order along the lines of Child and civic humanist sentiment that associated comfort and luxury with moral laxity.<sup>108</sup> It is anathema to nearly every precept of domestic environmentalism. Katherine Grier defines “domestic environmentalism,” a mode of “deterministic thought that assigned to the house’s physical setting and details the power to shape human character.”<sup>109</sup> A slatternly domestic arrangement, for example, could inure a person to grime and disorder, rendering her incapable of refinement. Just as bad, Ellen senses that the Spartan environment of Aunt Fortune's house discourages conviviality and comfort, generosity and spirituality; its lack of warming and softening upholstered chairs, carpets, and curtains as well as books and expressive curios, shows a character deficiency in Miss Fortune herself. She is hard, brusque, and impatient of sedentary or leisure activities such as reading. Her wooden house effects and reflects her wooden personality.

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<sup>107</sup> Brown, *Domestic Architecture*, 233. He notes that colors do not have universal significance but rather arouse different feelings according to “different associations” among cultures (234).

<sup>108</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 34.

<sup>109</sup> Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 5.

### **Critiquing Miss Fortune's Spartan Domesticity**

Indeed, Ellen's seeming (and, I would argue, to some extent *self-made*) nemesis Miss Fortune is frequently described as "sharp."<sup>110</sup> Her acquisitive business practices, even leading her to hoard the money sent to fund Ellen's trip to Scotland, and her eschewing of luxury and comfort for herself and others merit her descriptions of sharpness. Ellen's first letter to her mother notes Aunt Fortune's physical sharpness: "I think she is very good looking, or she would be if her nose was not quite so sharp: but, mamma, I can't tell you what sort of a feeling I have about her; it seems to me as if she was sharp all over. I am sure her eyes are as sharp as two needles" (111). Even Miss Fortune's movements are sharp. She walks in "jerks and starts and jumps" (111). Her manner of speaking is abrupt and sharp; her business sense is keen and sharp. Ellen's Marshman friends note that Ellen stays pliant and docile—a veritable textile—despite the needles of Fortune's "sharpness" (383) and despite the rustic domestic environment in which Ellen resides. Catharine Beecher, in her *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, criticizes the habit of sharpness as detrimental to the concept of the home as sanctuary: "many a good housekeeper, good in every respect but this [good temper], by wearing a countenance of anxiety and dissatisfaction, and by indulging in the frequent use of *sharp* and reprehensive tones, more than destroys all the comfort that otherwise would result from her system, neatness, and economy."<sup>111</sup> Beecher's statement

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<sup>110</sup> Warner's biographer Edward Halsey Foster suggests that Miss Fortune Emerson is a Yankee archetype; Mr. Van Brunt is the archetype of the more generous Dutch "Yorker" (*Susan and Anna Warner*, 46).

<sup>111</sup> Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 134-135; emphasis added.

highlights the shift from the Child handbook, which emphasizes utility over comfort, to Beecher's which promotes domestic space as restorative and influential, a space of unique power and influence for women.

Miss Fortune, ascetic in her living and shrewish in her manner, is Warner's nod to old-time Yankee domesticity. Miss Fortune's practical faculty, which earns even Ellen's admiration, is derived from an era of agrarian self-sufficiency. She keeps no servant for her home tasks and maintains a bare house easy to sluice down—no slipcovers to wash, no cushions to plump, no carpets to take up and tack down per season. In short, her domestic practice accords with handbooks such as Child's *The American Frugal Housewife* (1829), a predecessor to Beecher's manual.<sup>112</sup> Child defiantly proclaims, "I have attempted to teach how money can be saved, not how it can be *enjoyed*. If any persons think some of the maxims too rigidly economical, let them inquire how the largest fortunes among us have been made."<sup>113</sup> Child explains, "Books of this kind have usually been written for the wealthy: I have written for the poor."<sup>114</sup> And she follows with a compendium of sometimes oddly organized tips for saving and reusing, and never destroying.<sup>115</sup> Her work falls into what critic Lori Merish identifies as the civic humanist mode of thought in which luxury is wasteful, even anti-republican. Beecher, along with Downing, in contrast, writes for the middle class and emphasizes the importance of the domestic environment. She focuses on comfort and economy and gives hints for dealing with domestics. Ellen soon discovers that Miss Fortune Emerson, in her

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<sup>112</sup> Sklar, "Introduction," vi.

<sup>113</sup> Child, *The American Frugal Housewife*, 6.

<sup>114</sup> Child, *The American Frugal Housewife*, 6.

<sup>115</sup> Child, *The American Frugal Housewife*, 7.

home and arrangements, subscribes to the “country” aesthetic of Spartan domesticity as outlined in works such as Child’s.

Accordingly, Ellen’s room at Aunt Fortune’s house is a Spartan chamber yielding no quarter to dust. Ellen, already unconsciously imbued with concepts that parallel a Downing or a Beecher, is appalled at the coarseness and sharpness of her new room. She wakes from an exhausted sleep, hopeful and buoyed by the cheerful sunshine that makes the unpainted woodwork glow. But then her critical faculties awake. She surveys the room with increasing dismay: “But the floor was without the sign of a carpet, and the bare boards looked to Ellen very comfortless” (102). Rooms too “wooden” revolt Ellen’s sense of textile domesticity.<sup>116</sup> Downing, ever ready to be the arbiter of a middle-class domestic paradigm, proclaims, “*Next to carpets*, which are universal in all but the dwellings of the very poor in America, nothing ‘furnishes’ a room so much as curtains to the windows.”<sup>117</sup> Carpets, the number one means of furnishing a room (according to Downing), are absent here. Ellen’s bare feet will hit the cold board floors when she wakes up in the morning; her voice will resound in the hard room; her eyes will search in vain for color and ornament. Textiles such as upholstery and carpets (increasingly affordable in the nineteenth century) “softened” and “cushioned” the home, providing a haven of comfort and solace from the hard-edged “competitive and immoral business world” outside.<sup>118</sup> It is fitting, then, that Miss Fortune, notorious for her sharp-eyed

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<sup>116</sup> In Warner’s 1852 novel, *Queechy*, the protagonist encounters a setting, similar to Miss Fortune’s, that jars her sensibilities: “A painted yellow floor under foot, a room that looked excessively *wooden* and smelt of cheese, bare walls and a well-filled table, was all that she took in besides” (l: 275).

<sup>117</sup> Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses*, 373; emphasis added.

<sup>118</sup> Federhen, *Accumulation and Display*, 15. Federhen explains, “The increased availability of affordable textiles helped to bring upholstered furniture into American interiors in unprecedented

business practices, ever ready to make or save money, would have a home without softness.

And not only is the woodwork bare, the room itself is too. The room lacks the cosy clutter—the meaningful objects—that Ellen has been used to rearranging. She observes,

The room was very bare of furniture too. A dressing-table, pier-table, or whatnot, stood between the windows, but it was only a half-circular top of pine board set upon three very long, bare-looking legs—altogether of a most awkward and unhappy appearance, Ellen thought, and quite too high for her to use with any comfort. No glass hung over it, nor anywhere else. On the north side of the room was a fireplace; against the opposite wall stood Ellen's trunk and two chairs;—that was all, except the cot bed she was lying on, and which had its place opposite the windows. (102)

Most significant in Ellen's observation is the indecent "dressing-table, pier-table, or whatnot" with its "bare-looking legs" exposed for all to see. It elicits a horror at its lack of identifiable function. First, Ellen's inability properly to name the object suggests that it lacks qualities to make it useful or recognizable. It's too tall for use and thus fails as an object for which she has a name. It cannot be a dressing-table or pier-table for she couldn't dress at it nor does it have a mirror to check one's progress. The object fails to fit into Ellen's lexicon of furniture; she can discern no specific use for the object. And this inability to name an object becomes a recurrent

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quantities, effecting an overall 'softening' of the interior that was accentuated by inexpensive textile floor coverings" (51).

motif in the novel. On an early outdoor excursion, Ellen and her friend Nancy Vawse compete to name the stream's falls (122); the Swiss lady, Mrs. Vosier, has her name derogated to "Vawse," by all the folk in the area (208); Ellen's sadly neglected grandmother uses the colloquialism "paddysoy" for "paduasoy" (Padua silk) (262); Ellen's gift pony must have the right name (374); Ellen later hesitates between her possible last names of Montgomery and Lindsay (524).<sup>119</sup> Proper identification via naming carries weight; it places the object or person in his proper role. Naming establishes the relationship between subject and object. Second, the object's nakedness reveals its ill-conceived structure and suggests the exposure of something indecent. Much like the unpainted woodwork, the construction is left unfinished.

Finally, Ellen reviews her bed textiles. Her critique drives her to speech:

The coverlid of that came in for a share of her displeasure, being of home-made white and blue worsted mixed with cotton, exceeding thick and heavy.

'I wonder what sort of blanket is under it,' said Ellen, 'if I can ever get it off to see!—pretty good; but the sheets are cotton, and so is the pillow-case!'

She was still leaning on her elbow, looking around her with a rather discontented face. (102)

Ellen dismisses her bed furnishings with contempt. The qualities of the bedding—its home manufacture, its thickness and weight, its use of cotton, its location in a private bedchamber (which should reflect Ellen's values and tastes)—all have associations

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<sup>119</sup> See also Argersinger, "Family Embraces," 255, on naming as authorial control.

that Ellen finds distasteful, common and coarse. Her mother's lessons with the comparative swatches of good and poor merino wool fabric have made her sensible to the superior softness and drape of certain fabrics. Her sensitivity to quality and her "discontent" with anything less make her a proselyte of domestic sensibility—a nineteenth-century "princess and the pea"—equipped with skills that enable her to make proper choices for domestic textile furnishings that will foster sensibility in those who live with them (102).

Ellen's revulsion for the homespun worsted suggests a distaste not only for the thickness and weight—decidedly earthly, not ethereal like a fluffy quilted comforter—but also a distaste for its manufacture. Home labor is reminiscent of a self-sufficient republicanism—a nation of Jefferson's independent farmers—and, in Warner's day, Jacksonian democracy. To Warner and her ilk, President Andrew Jackson, with his infamous (albeit exaggerated) inaugural ceremony and possibly scandalous wife, represented a triumph of the unrefined, a threat to values of order and high culture embodied in a middle-class cult of domesticity. Warner's biographer, Edward Halsey Foster, writes that Warner was "fighting the anti-Jacksonian cause"<sup>120</sup> for an "aristocracy of virtue and manners."<sup>121</sup> Indeed, Warner's use of colloquial language for her rural Thirlwall characters (such as Miss Fortune Emerson<sup>122</sup> or Mr. Abraham Van Brunt) as well as depictions of insensibility

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<sup>120</sup> Foster, *Susan and Anna Warner*, 27.

<sup>121</sup> Foster, *Susan and Anna Warner*, 60.

<sup>122</sup> Aunt Fortune's last name of "Emerson" perhaps refers to Ralph Waldo Emerson and his friend and protégée Henry David Thoreau who wrote in "Economy" (from *Walden*, 1582), "I say, beware of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather a new wearer of clothes. [...] If you have any enterprise before you, try it in your old clothes. [...] Our moulting season, like that of the fowls, must be a crisis in our lives. [...] clothes are but our outmost cuticle and mortal coil. Otherwise we shall be found sailing under false colors, and be inevitably cashiered at last by our own

to middle-class taste and comfort indicate to Warner a dangerous class failure that justifies a hierarchy of taste.<sup>123</sup>

Ellen's sojourn at Aunt Fortune's nevertheless provides Ellen with a sense of the labor behind domestic practice. Ellen's labor epiphany occurs over pairs of white stockings. Ellen's stockings, chosen by her mother, reflect her mother's taste for refined goods but also indicate Ellen's leisure. Only non-laboring, non-rural girls can wear white stockings without ruining them. Her white stockings fall prey to Aunt Fortune's zeal for drabness; they are drowned in the dye kettle because white things are so difficult to keep white. Aunt Fortune calls for "white maple bark" (109) to stew in her brass kettle, the conventional dye method to make "a good light-brown slate color."<sup>124</sup> Ellen laments the violation of her six pairs of white stockings, but Aunt Fortune reasons, "'How many pair of white stockings would you like to drive into the mud and let me wash out every week?'" Astonished, Ellen replies, "'You wash! [...] I didn't think of *your* doing it'" (113). Ellen learns the labor behind her textiles and values them the more. Spartan-oriented Lydia Maria Child dedicates just one paragraph to maintaining the whiteness of fabric (silk), perhaps suggesting the inadvisability of this enterprise,<sup>125</sup> but middle-class, refined Catharine Beecher outlines extensive directions for washing and stirring and dipping in bluing.<sup>126</sup> White

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opinion, as well as that of mankind" (1582). Thanks to Sharon Kehl-Califano for this point. Or Emerson's own words: "Common sense is genius dressed in its working clothes."

<sup>123</sup> In *Queechy*, the protagonist Fleda Ringgan contemplates the conditions of republican egalitarianism in which her "countrymen do yield honour where they think it is due" (305). She believes that "there might be a great deal of pleasure in raising the tone of mind and character [earlier identified "intelligence and cultivation"] among the people,—as one could who had influence over a large neighborhood" (306).

<sup>124</sup> Child, *The American Frugal Housewife*, 39.

<sup>125</sup> Child, *The American Frugal Housewife*, 14.

<sup>126</sup> Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 311.



articles usually require an extra night's soaking;<sup>127</sup> they are especially prone to stains and yellowing, for which Beecher offers a miscellany of remedies for mildewed, scorched, and otherwise stained white cloth, as if any one of them might be a hopeless case.<sup>128</sup> Beecher's directions suggest a later nineteenth-century premium on white items as indicative of taste and leisure. In short, Warner justifies Ellen's decampment from Aunt Fortune's and to the Humphreyses' as a flight toward culture and refined society and away from coarseness.

Ellen's disposition to a middle-class domesticity enacted by textile furnishing is stymied in Aunt Fortune's farmhouse. First, her status as an undesired ward gives her no property interest in the domestic environment. Second, her practices of containment are severely limited by the scarcity of domestic objects. Ellen's inability to consume and tend textiles in the creation of a softening and elevating domestic environment also thwarts her sense of domestic womanhood. She lacks the sentimental objects of her proprietary care, a sentimental materialism.<sup>129</sup> She has very little power to effect domestic change. Ellen doesn't necessarily reform Miss Fortune's competing ideology, although she makes ineffectual sallies by pleading for her white stockings or teaching Nancy to be more careful with her trunk, a training linked to Christian potentiality. In fact, Mr. Van Brunt, who has an avuncular sympathy for little Ellen, helps her to refine domestic space by putting up closet nails

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<sup>127</sup> Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 310.

<sup>128</sup> Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 327-328. Interestingly, Beecher and Stowe's 1869 collaboration, *The American Woman's Home*, omits laundry instructions, suggesting that middle-class women outsourced their laundry as soon as they could. Susan Strasser explains, "From all available evidence—how-to manuals, budget studies of poor people's households, diaries—it appears that women jettisoned laundry, their most hated task, whenever they had any discretionary money at all" (*Never Done: A History of American Housework*, 105).

<sup>129</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 11.

or procuring a cushioned and upholstered rocking chair.<sup>130</sup> He, in the end, is converted to Ellen's Christianity. It seems, then, that a capacity to proper feeling is reflected in or evoked by one's sensibility to comfortable domestic space as well as God's redeeming love.

Indeed, one's accretion of textile knowledge and sensitivity is a life-long training. It requires continued employment at creating and interpreting textile statements. Ellen's dogged pursuit of textile knowledge parallels her dogged work toward a Christian faith. Both forms of knowledge (textile and faith) require continual application and maintenance of sympathy, and one inspires the other, Ellen believes. Edward Halsey Foster, a Warner biographer, explains, "Ellen becomes a Christian not through a sudden awareness of divine grace but through an extensive education in Christian behavior—an education begun by her mother and carried out by members of the Marshman and Humphreys families."<sup>131</sup> Thus, her evolution of faith is a matter of devoted application and evaluation, as suggested by Horace Bushnell in his book *Christian Nurture* (1846)<sup>132</sup> and similar to Warner's own "stitch—stitch—stitch."<sup>133</sup>

### **Practicing Textile Domesticity**

Not surprisingly, Ellen soon thinks of herself as more "at home" when she is at the Humphreyses' than when she is at Miss Fortune's. The Humphreyses' house,

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<sup>130</sup> Stymied by "harder and straighter-backed chairs never were invented" (213), Van Brunt gives Ellen a cushioned chair which will allow her to recline and rock. Ellen shows Alice: "the back is cushioned, and the elbows, as well as the seat;—it's queer-looking, ain't it? But it's very comfortable" (221). And comfort is what helps to make a home.

<sup>131</sup> Foster, *Susan and Anna Warner*, 39.

<sup>132</sup> Foster, *Susan and Anna Warner*, 39.

<sup>133</sup> Susan Warner qtd. in Anna Warner, *Susan Warner ("Elizabeth Wetherell")*, 223.

a Downingesque cottage, falls in the middle of the continuum between Aunt Fortune's rustic farmhouse and the Marshmans' Ventnor villa.<sup>134</sup> Its faded white exterior paint has lost the offensive glare that Downing attributes to gleaming white paint; the house begins to achieve the grayish wood color that Downing claims helps to integrate a home into its environment. Downing, paying tribute to "the necessity of a unity of color in the house and the country about it" as inspired by Sir Joshua Reynolds, writes,

We think, in the beginning, that the color of all buildings in the country, should be of those *soft and quiet shades* called neutral tints, such as fawn, drab, gray, brown, etc., and that all positive colors, such as white, yellow, red, blue, black, etc., should always be avoided; neutral tints being those drawn from nature, and harmonizing with her, and positive colors being most discordant when introduced into rural scenery.<sup>135</sup>

But he makes an exception for pine-embowered houses such as the Humphreyses': "To leave some little consolation to the lovers of white-lead, we will add that there is one position in which their favorite color may not only be tolerated but often has a happy effect. We mean in the case of a country house or cottage, deeply embowered in trees."<sup>136</sup> Its thronging pine trees "embower" the house although Alice has had a few removed to frame a view of the Nose. From her parlor, Alice can look off into the picturesque distance. And, here, Ellen can resume her studies

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<sup>134</sup> Merish articulates a domestic continuum that includes "a Puritan model of domestic frugality," "an evangelical, sentimental ideal of domestic warmth and comfort" (as seen in the works of Stowe), and "a genteel model of domestic formality" (*Sentimental Materialism*, 148).

<sup>135</sup> Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses*, 202.

<sup>136</sup> Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses*, 200.

of middle-class aesthetics. Alice leads Ellen through the “geography of the house” (163), a place to be mapped and studied just as Ellen would study her textbooks.<sup>137</sup> Alice points out her “cabinet of curiosities” (“There I keep my dried flowers, my minerals, and a very odd collection of curious things of all sorts that I am constantly picking up”) (163).

The Humphreyses’ house uses textiles to establish a textile domesticity. Alice imposes associations (memories of events and people) and values (domestic security and nurture) on the fabrics of her home. Moreover, her appreciation and care enables her to exert proprietary care and control of the textile objects—washing and mending and simply appreciating the textiles becomes a metonym for the tending and affection for the family. The role of service, displaced onto textiles, becomes a form of care in ownership. When she first offers Ellen a tour of the Humphreyses’ house, Alice points out the “settee for summer and a sofa for winter” (162). The winter sofa, however, earns special attention for its slipcover, a fabric endowed with meaning. Alice says, “its old chintz covers are very pleasant to me, for I remember them as far back as I remember any thing” (163).<sup>138</sup> Critic Sara Quay, interested in the role of objects as keepsakes and markers of sentiment, explains,

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<sup>137</sup> See Trubey, “Imagined Revolution,” 59 on the practice of reading; see Zboray and Zboray, “Books, Reading, and the World of Goods,” on books as “multivalent objects”: “they could entertain and educate and their very costliness could convey owners’ status, but they also offered solace, kindled memories, and, in general, helped maintain ties to loved ones” (588).

<sup>138</sup> In *The Beecher Sisters*, Barbara A. White describes a cotton carpet with flowers painted in oils produced by their mother: “The carpet lasted to Catharine’s adulthood and was one of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s earliest memories” (3). This personalized textile carries associations of the deified mother, and the artistry is a reminder to practice the skills patterned by the mother’s domesticity. See White, *The Beecher Sisters*, 4.

*The Wide, Wide World* offers a third alternative, one which stands at the juncture between the overdetermined value of objects under consumerism and the purely practical value of things in the Age of Homespun. The difference lies in the type of meaning attributed to material things. As Ellen learns, by investing objects with affect, by imagining them as repositories of emotion connected with the home, she can overcome the pain—the nostalgia—of modern life.<sup>139</sup>

They also point to a sentimental domesticity identified by Merish, a domesticity through which love and care (revealed through shabby, sentimentalized objects) mask the labor so painfully, strenuously obvious in a Spartan home with a zealous housekeeper.<sup>140</sup> Well-loved objects show a domesticity in which “objects are fully incorporated into a sentimental economy of feeling.”<sup>141</sup>

The durability and distinctiveness of textiles—aspects of their textility—form a stable part of Alice’s consciousness; they form the unique context of her experiences and, animated as “agents” in the family home, they serve as tokens, metonyms, and values. Alice treats her upholstered easy chairs as old friends. She says, “Now, my dear, it is time to introduce you to my most excellent of easy chairs—the best things in the room, aren’t they? Put yourself in that—now do you feel at home?” (164). And Ellen does feel at home. The chintz covers mediate Alice’s mother’s absence by evoking the shared sentiment toward the faithful fabric. Moreover, chintz, with its “vivid designs” and stiff sheen, could be all that homespun was not.<sup>142</sup> Its brightly

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<sup>139</sup> Quay, “Homesickness in Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*,” 40.

<sup>140</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 148.

<sup>141</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 150.

<sup>142</sup> Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 70.

printed flowers appealed to a nineteenth-century language of flowers and brought the cultivated outdoors inside. The sheen provided a refined, polished luster. (Certain chintzes, however, could lose their sheen in laundering and therefore required special care.<sup>143</sup>) The informal yet polished prettiness of chintz made it a popular choice in domestic handbooks. Beecher and Stowe recommend it as a “furniture print” which can be gotten for “about twenty-five cents a yard”<sup>144</sup> and which can resuscitate “broken and disgraced furniture” for “a new lease of life.”<sup>145</sup> Downing puts in his share of praise for chintz curtains which “will always produce a pretty effect, at very little cost.”<sup>146</sup> He sees the informality of chintz as inviting sociability and ease of manner as opposed to more expensive materials. He writes, “In the one case, all is as cold, hard, and formal, as solid mahogany and marble-top centre-tables, *alias*, bare conventionalities and frigid social feeling, can make it; in the other, all is as easy and agreeable as low couches, soft light chintzes and cushions—*alias*, cordiality, and genuine, frank hospitality can render it.”<sup>147</sup> The significance of Alice’s worn chintz covers, however, lies in the “superimposition” of associations over the fabric.<sup>148</sup>

Alice’s bedroom, her most personal site of textile expression, reflects her pure, Christian character and the softening powers of domestic textiles. In Alice’s bedroom,

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<sup>143</sup> Carmichael, Linton, & Price, “Chintz,” 77.

<sup>144</sup> Beecher & Stowe, 73.

<sup>145</sup> Beecher & Stowe, *The American Woman’s Home*, 74; see also Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses*, 413, about transforming boxes into cushioned benches with chintz. Gordon, too, comments on chintz’s power: “Tired sofas, like exhausted women, could ‘slip into quaintly patterned chintz,’ and be energized ‘with a perky ruffle’” (“Woman’s Domestic Body,” 287).

<sup>146</sup> Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses*, 374.

<sup>147</sup> Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses*, 406-407.

<sup>148</sup> See Attfield, *Wild Things*, 143.

[t]he carpet covered only the middle of the floor; the rest was painted white. The furniture was common but neat as wax. Ample curtains of white dimity clothed the three windows, and lightly draped the bed. The toilet-table was covered with snow-white muslin, and by the toilet-cushion stood, late as it was, a glass of flowers. Ellen thought it must be a pleasure to sleep there. (163-164)

Alice's bedroom also provides a stark contrast to Ellen's chamber of colonial-era arrangements. Here, Ellen sees gleaming white woodwork and all the white textiles her heart could desire. White dimity swathes the bed and windows. The sheer cotton fabric, with its vertical "warp cords," filters light but also lightens its presence.<sup>149</sup> The dimity and muslin, while cheap, offered the height of affordable refinement for the middle-class aesthete on a minister's daughter's budget. Ellen takes no notice of Alice's bed linens so they must be unexceptionable—linen, in fact, rather than cotton. White fabrics have strong biblical connections to Jesus's resurrection, for instance. Here, they indicate Alice's strong Christian faith. The white symbolizes Alice's moral and spiritual purity, but it also, in terms of Miller's objectification, produces it. The white paint and textiles—because Alice values their pristine qualities—inspire her to these higher sentiments.

White goods may also veil more troubling values, however. Critic Bridget T. Heneghan, in *Whitewashing America: Material Culture and Race in the Antebellum Imagination* (2003), argues that "[W]hite things represent an ideological army, expected to fight its battles on multiple fronts."<sup>150</sup> Indeed, the battle waged by white

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<sup>149</sup> Carmichael, Linton, & Price, "Dimity," 117.

<sup>150</sup> Heneghan, *Whitewashing America*, 11.

goods—including Alice’s “snow-white muslin” or Ellen’s white table-skirt—is one of racial definition. White goods enabled the erasure of African-American slavery and the assertion of white racial claims to moral and spiritual superiority; they became “signifiers of whiteness, helping the nation attempt to segregate, deny, expel the blackness of slavery.”<sup>151</sup>

Inspired to perform a middle-class textile domesticity but located in an ascetic, agrarian domestic arrangement, Ellen is uniquely situated to survey the seams of domestic practice. Merish explains that an “antebellum work ethic” was both “challenged” and “defined” by “an emerging consumer ethic” represented by Ellen.<sup>152</sup> Because she witnesses and even performs the maintenance labor of textiles—spinning with Mrs. Vawse, mending, and ironing—she does not fetishize them. She values their ability to convey and instill values, but she may not be aware that she and others have endowed them with these qualities. In fact, Ellen craves the softening, masking powers of textiles in her room, so she and Alice begin their imposition of textile domesticity on a dressing table whose bare wood and spindly legs appear naked. When Alice broaches the topic of providing a skirt for the immodest dressing-table, Ellen is cautious:

‘Ellen,’ said she [Alice] presently, ‘I have been considering your dressing-table. It looks rather doleful. I’ll make you a present of some dimity, and when you come to see me you shall make a cover for it that will reach down to the floor and hide those long legs.’

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<sup>151</sup> Heneghan, *Whitewashing America*, 5. Heneghan draws from archaeologist James Deetz’s concept of the “whitening of America” (4).

<sup>152</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 137; see also 141.



'That wouldn't do at all,' said Ellen; 'aunt Fortune would go off into all sorts of fit.'

'What about?'

'Why the washing, Miss Alice—to have such a great thing to wash every now and then. You can't think what a fuss she makes if I have more than just so many white clothes in the wash every week.'

'That's too bad,' said Alice. 'Suppose you bring it up to me—it wouldn't be often—and I'll have it washed for you,—if you care enough about it to take the trouble.' (224-225)

Ellen knows that clothing the table's corporeality will anger Aunt Fortune.<sup>153</sup> Before her arrival at Thirlwall, labor has been invisible to Ellen. Living in the hotel, Ellen watches meals arrive and laundry disappear. But Aunt Fortune soon corrects this deficiency. She announces herself as the labor force within the farmhouse:

"There's nothing in this house but goes through my hand, I can tell you" (113).

Ellen has become aware of the labor investment required to maintain white textiles, and she fears the wrath of the housekeeper aunt who will be the one to shoulder the extra labor. Alice, however, whose dedicated servant Margery toils away at the laundry at a back shed, out of sight of the picturesque view, sees the white fabric as a type of necessity. Beecher and Stowe, speaking of white muslin curtains, declare, "No matter how coarse the muslin, so it be white and hang in graceful folds, there is a charm in it that supplies the want of multitudes of other things."<sup>154</sup> Their pronouncement holds that the white table skirt will feminize and beautify as it hides

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<sup>153</sup> See Gordon, "Woman's Domestic Body," 289, on the relation of table-skirts to women's skirts.

<sup>154</sup> Beecher & Stowe, *The American Woman's Home*, 74; emphasis added.

the table's wooden corporeality. Indeed, Alice realizes that Ellen's room is in danger of failing to provide a proper hominess. Ellen is daily exposed to the hard edges and rustic living which could desensitize her to softness and beauty.

When Ellen later makes the Humphreyses' house her own, she assumes the role of middle-class domestic woman who effects nurture through textile care. Alice, preparing for her own death by consumption, implores Ellen to care for her father and brother John, to take her place in the house. Ellen interviews Margery the housekeeper to inquire the extent of Alice's duties. Then she launches her program of dusting and tidying the library with all its books and papers; skimming the cream; washing breakfast dishes; and inspecting and mending, if necessary, the house's textiles. Margery exclaims of Alice's needlework, "A beautiful mender she was to be sure! Look here, Miss Ellen,—just see that patch—the way it is put on—so evenly by a thread all round; and the stitches, see—and see the way this rent is darned down;—oh, that was the way she did every thing!" (456). The care and variety of stitches indicate a science Ellen has not yet mastered. She places herself under the direction of Mrs. Vawse who teaches her to patch and darn with tiny stitches. Ellen practices on rags and "would sit making vain endeavours to arrange a large linen patch properly, till her cheeks were burning with excitement; and bend over a darn, doing her best to make invisible stitches, till Mrs. Vawse was obliged to assure her it was quite unnecessary to take *so much* pains. Taking pains, however, is the sure

way to success" (457). Ellen does not underestimate the value of the family's goods and she does all she can to tend them.<sup>155</sup>

Moreover, her "taking pains" over the mending knits her further into a domestic sisterhood as she assumes the tasks and skills of Margery and Mrs. Vawse.<sup>156</sup> She learns from a servant and a working-class countrywoman how to tend to the family's textile investments. Susan Strasser, in *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (1982), explains, "Although factory production had cheapened textiles considerably, they remained expensive enough to promote conservation by mending, making scraps into patchwork, and converting old clothes."<sup>157</sup> In fact, Ellen "studied the shelves of the linen closet, and the chests of drawers in Mr. Humphreys's room, till she almost knew them by heart" (457). Her inspection of their textile goods shows a secret gaze through which she also studies their characters. To Ellen, each textile has an intimate connection to the Humphreyses, each is an extension of their persons. Every one in the house speaks "with a tone of remembrance" (459) and Ellen soon attains those qualities attributed to domestic womanhood. She is "untiring" in her duties, she employs "her best diligence and care," and she shows "zeal" for her work (459).

All of Ellen's earlier toil at Aunt Fortune's house pays off when she is able to bear the responsibility of the Humphreyses' household. Early, Ellen confesses, "Mamma never kept house, and I never saw any body do it" (168). And here Ellen

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<sup>155</sup> Susan Warner herself was known for her nigh on invisible stitches: Anna Warner relates the story of Susan making neck gathers so fine (a result of small, closely placed basting/running stitch) that they would not fit into a collar of a shirt (*Susan Warner ("Elizabeth Wetherell")*, 198-199).

<sup>156</sup> Susan Strasser writes, "Sewing was linked with adult feminine companionship among women of all classes, but most sewing was done within the family circle" (*Never Done*, 134).

<sup>157</sup> Strasser, *Never Done*, 131.

must thank Aunt Fortune for forcing her hands to tasks she finds distasteful. Repeatedly, Warner tells us that “Ellen had no fancy for such handiwork” (113); “it was a kind of work she had no love for” (141); “She had no love, in the first place, for household work, and now her whole time was filled up with it” (360). In fact, Warner noted in her own journal, “I should like to see the day when I need not work. Nevertheless, I find myself the better for it; it does me good; I know it. But however that may be, I do not like to wash dishes, nor dust furniture, nor to sweep rooms, nor to set the table”; “I like better to write or to read than to sew or work.”<sup>158</sup> Ellen’s skills of domestic economy, put to the test first during Aunt Fortune’s illness and second after Alice’s death, show her doling goods from the pantry, sweeping, setting the table, making scrambled eggs (a skill learned from Margery) (362), making the bed, dusting, cooking gruel (364), and churning (365).

Only through learning to tend the home environment through care and consumption of textile goods may Ellen manage a home. Catharine Beecher must have foreseen cases such as Ellen’s. She dedicates her first chapters to ennobling the domestic profession and chapter four to “Domestic Economy as a Branch of Study.” She argues, “[T]here is no period, in a young lady’s life, when she will not find such knowledge useful to herself, and to others. [...] [E]very female member of the family will be required to lend some aid in providing food and the conveniences of living.”<sup>159</sup> (Indeed, Warner mastered all these tasks out of necessity at the family’s Constitution Island retreat after their successive financial hardships.) While Beecher does not preclude other studies, she emphasizes the need for

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<sup>158</sup> Warner qtd. in Anna Warner, *Susan Warner (“Elizabeth Wetherell”)*, 189-190.

<sup>159</sup> Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 41.

professionally guided study of the domestic sciences. Fortunes to supply housekeepers and cooks are not inexhaustible, and mothers cannot be relied upon to offer the proper training for young women: "In reply to the thousand-times-repeated remark, that girls must be taught their domestic duties by their mothers, at home, it may be inquired, in the first place, What proportion of mothers are qualified to teach a *proper* and *complete* system of Domestic Economy?"<sup>160</sup> Indeed, Catharine Beecher lost her own mother at age sixteen and assumed household duties for her father and seven siblings; she realized that the knowledge of domestic economy was a valuable but tenuous legacy.<sup>161</sup> School curricula in domestic sciences could ensure the continuance of the legacy regardless of a mother's health or ability to convey the information. Ellen, a reluctant student, nevertheless learns enough to maintain a household. Mr. Marshman even looks on, bemused, while she manages the buttery (369).

Beecher suggests that a domestic education transcends class distinctions. She relates anecdotes of wealthy daughters being sent to mantuamakers to learn sewing, for instance.<sup>162</sup> Girls in a regimen of domestic economy appreciate the labor of the work and know how to guide its proper completion; they eschew "indolence."<sup>163</sup> Whether or not a girl employs these skills on a daily basis, she is nevertheless fitted for any station of society into which she may fall. And here, perhaps, is a significant relation to Warner's own story in the depletion of the family fortune.

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<sup>160</sup> Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 43.

<sup>161</sup> White, *The Beecher Sisters*, 4-5.

<sup>162</sup> Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 45.

<sup>163</sup> Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 45.

Moreover, domestic tasks sublimated the will and tempered the passions. A good housekeeper keeps a pleasant temper even if the cat walks through the biscuit dough (168) or the eggs burn to the skillet (368) or one's morning's work is ruined. The very repetition and familiarity of domestic work can inure one to crises; the equable housekeeper knows that upset will solve nothing. Indeed, Ellen learns to do Aunt Fortune's spinning and her productivity is both material and immaterial: "the hours of spinning that wrought so many knots of yarn for her aunt, wrought better things yet for the little spinner: patience and gentleness grew with the practice of them; this wearisome work was one of the many seemingly untoward things which in reality bring out good" (419).

### **Exploring Other Sites of Domestic Practice**

Ellen's work parallels the earlier image of Mrs. Vawse, the independent but cultured Swiss lady, who is spinning upon the occasion of Ellen's first sight of her. Mrs. Vawse calls for her visitors to enter, and she is "stepping briskly back and forth before a large spinning-wheel. She half turned her head to see who the comers were, then stopped her wheel instantly, and came to meet them with open arms" (187). Her work echoes the colonial period of home production, an ethos of self-sufficiency like Miss Fortune's. She nurses, spins, tailors, knits, and picks hops (194). And although she is of the working class, she is cultured and refined. Even in her humble chalet, she maintains the utmost order, cleanliness, and comfort:

Most of the floor was covered with a thick rag carpet; where the boards could be seen they were beautifully clean and white, and every thing

else in the room in this respect matched with the boards. The panes of glass in the little windows were clean and bright as panes of glass could be made; the hearth was clean swept up; the cupboard doors were unstained and unsoiled, though fingers had worn the paint off; dust was nowhere. On a little stand by the chimney corner lay a large Bible and another book; close beside stood a cushioned arm chair (190).

The rag carpet, recycled from worn-out fabrics and then hand-woven (or, with a rug, braided and stitched), softens the domestic environment just as well as a store-bought carpet; thus, refinement is not just a condition of market consumption.<sup>164</sup> And her ownership of a cushioned arm chair (as opposed to Miss Fortune's lack of one) suggests her sensibility and sympathy; it also suggests that she spends time there contemplating her Bible. Refinement, based on middle-class tenets, actually transcends social or financial status, according to Ellen.

Near the end of the novel, Ellen's trip to her mother's family in Scotland roughly traces genteel domestic refinement back to its roots. Ellen's mother's family, the Lindsays, is a family of landed wealth, owning houses in Edinburgh and on the Tyne river. When Ellen first enters the country house library at the Braes, she is impressed:

The house was handsome, comfortably, luxuriously furnished; but without any attempt at display. Things rather old-fashioned than otherwise; plain, even homely in some instances; yet evidently there was no sparing of money in any line of use or comfort; nor were

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<sup>164</sup> See Steedman cited in Attfield, *Wild Things*, 139, on the significance of rag rugs.

reading and writing, painting and music, strangers there.

Unconsciously acting upon her brother's [i.e., John Humphreys's] principle of judging of people from their works, Ellen, from what she saw gathered around her, formed a favourable opinion of her relations.  
(501)

Ellen approves of the sense of comfort and tradition inherent in the "old-fashioned," worn-in domestic goods. Neither too sparse or too conspicuous, the furnishings she scrutinizes invite repose as well as occupation through reading, writing, and the arts; a family would enjoy spending much time here. Her liking for the "old things" she sees in the houses and in the Edinburgh museums signals her appreciation for the domestic traditions initiated in the royal courts of Europe and adopted later by the "upper middle classes."<sup>165</sup> The Lindsays' Edinburgh townhouse's library also wins her favor:

She liked the looks of it very much. Plenty of books, old-looking comfortable furniture; pleasant light; all manner of etceteras around which rejoiced Ellen's heart. Mr. Lindsay noticed her pleased glance passing from one thing to another. He placed her in a deep easy chair, took off her bonnet and threw it on the sofa, and kissing her fondly asked her if she felt at home. 'Not yet,' Ellen said; but her look said it would not take long to make it so. (517)

The "etceteras" and books personalize the room and assure Ellen that individual pursuits and expressions have been fostered here; this too is a domestic space

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<sup>165</sup> Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, xii.



through which “luxury goods” will “civilize and spiritualize.”<sup>166</sup> Moreover, the comfortable surroundings evoke the pleasures and refinements Ellen has known at the Marshmans’ Ventnor house in New York. But Ellen’s “Not yet,” proves prescient. The Lindsays’ homes do not afford the same domesticity to which she is accustomed.

Because Ellen is the Lindsays’ “treasure” (503, 504), their very “own” (505), and “a darling possession—a dear plaything” (538), she is denied her efforts to control her self and her domestic space. The power of her domestic sensibility is discounted. The Lindsays, including Ellen’s grandmother (Mrs. Lindsay), uncle (Mr. Lindsay), and aunt (Lady Keith), denigrate Ellen’s American education and domesticity (including her textile faculty through spinning, ironing, and mending, for instance) by silencing and satirizing. The Lindsays’ extensive interrogations concerning her attitudes toward George Washington and American traditions suggest that Warner is broaching significant concerns here.

In fact, the Lindsays’ critique exposes the political and ideological rifts not only between Great Britain and the United States but within the States as well. They mistrust and denigrate the democratizing, middle-class, textile domesticity that Ellen equates with spiritual uplift and social progress. Thus, virtually imprisoned in her gilded cage, Ellen has little ability to practice containment or consumption of refining textile goods, and she has very little opportunity to proselytize her sober Christian message that accompanies the textiles. Critics such as Amy Kaplan urge us to see the domestic not “as a static condition but as the process of domestication”; in this

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<sup>166</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 91.

consideration, domesticity becomes an ideology to be spread.<sup>167</sup> Ultimately, Kaplan suggests a new interpretation of novels of the 1850s in which “narratives of domesticity and female subjectivity” are “inseparable from narratives of empire and nation building.”<sup>168</sup> Thus, Warner represents a middle-class domesticity under attack by an “aristocracy of wealth and birth”—literally the Lindsays—as well as by Aunt Fortune’s Spartan ways. When Ellen’s sense of subjectivity is constrained by the Lindsays’ ownership—an object position she concedes till she reaches her majority—so too is her ability to domesticate.

No money is spared, however, when John Humphreys decorates the rooms to which he brings his new wife Ellen in the unpublished last chapter of *The Wide, Wide World*. He adds refining “clutter” in the form of statuary and framed art to the familiar goods brought from the old house. Ellen gazes about her, noting the “very loved things [...] as near as possible in the same arrangement” with the “same table in the middle of the floor” (571); she observes with joy that the “library looked like itself” (574). Her own study has an heirloom escritoire (582, 583) as well as copies of Correggio’s recumbent Magdalen and a blue-eyed Madonna and child (578). John, enamored of the Madonna’s beauty based in the “true” of her spiritual happiness, argues, “Perfection of the mind certainly *tends* to perfection of body, and perhaps all the varieties of uncomeliness with which our eyes are familiar have come from the near or remote workings of evil. Recollect how intellect, refinement, peace, and love write their characters on the countenance and in the course of generations

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<sup>167</sup> Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” 184.

<sup>168</sup> Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” 186. Gillian Brown offers, “The manifest destiny of American women to domesticate and Christianize the world can be realized through the work they perform in their homes” (*Domestic Individualism*, 20).

change the very conformation of men?" (579). Warner yet again emphasizes the power of domestic space to elicit refinement and goodness, and Ellen is thus rewarded with her very own home and familiar, sentimentalized, refining goods.

### Conclusion

Throughout the novel, the textiles of apparel and domestic furnishings seem the most significant markers of Ellen's refinement and self-definition. Her observations of the comfort of parlors and bedchambers—and, more serious, her associations and judgments about people and their textile furnishings—serve to reveal her attitudes as a vessel of the ideology of middle-class domesticity. Ellen's dedication to textile domesticity includes containing, consuming, and tending domestic textiles. Textiles, with their unique properties, such as warmth, versatility, or softness, improve domestic space. Their ability to cushion, warm, and brighten space invites leisure and sociality<sup>169</sup> in the domestic space, bringing families together, fostering mood, and even, through appropriation, inspiring spiritual contemplation. The middle-class domestic woman orchestrates this textile domesticity. Ellen has little doubt in the refining powers of textiles and their ability to form the middle-class family home full of nurture.

The fact that Ellen is a fictional deployment by Susan Warner makes the character rich for study. Ellen "tries on" various domestic sites such as Green's Hotel, Aunt Fortune's, the Humphreyses', the Marshmans' and the Lindsays'; she visits the Van Brunts, Mrs. Vawse, and the expunged Richardsons. Warner moves Ellen about freely, enabling her to demonstrate the necessity of a middle-class

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<sup>169</sup> Attfield, *Wild Things*, 137.

domesticity as a democratic ideology. It enables Ellen to move in all social circles with dignity and sensibility and to spread, if she can, notions of textile comfort, particularly as sentimentalized by the emotional associations of goods. But we may also see how domestic space reconfigures Ellen, how her choices compose her character.

*The Wide, Wide World* models textiles' roles in middle-class pious consumption in a move toward refinement and self-definition. Ellen places her faith in the power of goods, particularly textile goods, to reform national character. She believes, much as Henry W. Cleaveland, William Backus, and Samuel D. Backus, authors of *Village and Farm Cottages* (1856), that "he who improves the dwelling-houses of a people in relation to their comforts, habits, and morals, makes a ... lasting reform at the very foundation of society."<sup>170</sup>

An excised section of *The Wide, Wide World* suggests that these reforms must be instituted across race and class as well. In the original *The Wide, Wide World* manuscript, Warner describes Ellen's encounters with an African-American neighbor in New York City.<sup>171</sup> The girls meet on the street outside Ellen's hotel, and Ellen shares some figs with her. Later, Rebecca returns a purse that Ellen had dropped on the doorstep. She confesses that her honesty has cost her something because the family could desperately have used the money in the purse for "victuals."<sup>172</sup> Ellen and Mrs. Montgomery hope to reinforce Rebecca's Christian

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<sup>170</sup> Cleaveland, Backus, & Backus qtd. in Clark, *The American Family Home*, 3.

<sup>171</sup> Susan Warner records the existence of a chapter "about the little black girl" removed from *The Wide, Wide World*; she explains "that that entire interesting relation had been expunged from the book" (qtd. in Anna Warner, *Susan Warner ("Elizabeth Wetherell")*, 296). Susan L. Roberson's article, "Ellen Montgomery's Other Friend," uncovers this section describing Ellen's friendship with an African-American neighbor girl.

<sup>172</sup> Warner qtd. in Roberson, "Ellen Montgomery's Other Friend," 22.

morality by rewarding her for her honesty. Ellen helps to sew a dress of “brown stuff, thick & strong” for Rebecca, and she and Mrs. Montgomery then deliver it. Rebecca Richardson lives with her mother, a washerwoman, in a cellar apartment, “a very poor looking place,” dark and smelly from Mrs. Richardson’s profession.<sup>173</sup> The Montgomerys’ visit and gift elicit both an “open expression of gratitude” from Rebecca and a promise from Mrs. Richardson that she will teach Rebecca always to do right and to heed Mrs. Montgomery’s advice: “Trust in the Lord & do good; [...] & verily thou shall be fed.”<sup>174</sup> The Montgomerys’ Christian mission is stitched together with the gift of the textile garment.

Warner’s expunged scenes involving the Richardsons complicate an understanding of domesticity in *The Wide, Wide World*. Although Warner does not seem to be advocating an equalization of race relations, she does seem to suggest that the nation’s Christian morality depends on spreading some notions of middle-class domesticity (particularly relating to interior furnishing) among all races and classes. The middle-class home will never be entirely stable if poor children in famished homes are roving the streets scavenging for lost goods. Warner’s understanding of the challenges to middle-class domesticity, represented through Ellen’s narrative, anticipates in some ways the literary deployment of textiles in different configurations of domesticity.

Warner’s novel emphasizes textiles as constitutive of middle-class homes (and gendered spheres of labor) led by mothers devoted to their children’s spiritual and educational welfare. Literary texts produced in relative proximity to Warner’s

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<sup>173</sup> Warner qtd. in Roberson, “Ellen Montgomery’s Other Friend,” 25.

<sup>174</sup> Warner qtd. in Roberson, “Ellen Montgomery’s Other Friend,” 27, 26.

novel, however, consider approaches to textile domesticity that stretch this middle-class ideology. Shaker women writers, for instance, used creative textile imagery to represent their pre-industrial labor toward a heavenly, communal family. Their work draws on Biblical garment imagery to justify a textile domesticity that is disengaged from the type of refinement outlined by Downing.

**Figure 1**

Adams, Hester Ann. "A Sheet Prepared and Written According to Mother Ann's Directions."  
Reprinted with permission, Collection of the United Society of Shakers, Sabbathday Lake, Maine.





## CHAPTER 2

### THE FABRIC OF SHAKER WOMEN'S LIVES: HESTER ANN ADAMS AND SHAKER DOMESTICITY

#### Introduction

In an 1843 prophecy written by Canterbury, New Hampshire Shaker Hester Ann Adams (1817-1888), the holy prophet Elisha (of 2 Kings fame) assures, "they that seek Me early shall find Me," a reference to Proverbs 8:17.<sup>1</sup> Adams herself had begun her "seeking" early, moving into the Canterbury Shaker "Church Family" at the age of nine and a half.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, a twentieth-century biographer identifies her paternal grandfather as a Methodist minister and her maternal grandfather as a Congregational minister. In short, her religious journey was an inheritance of sorts, and she indeed found "Him" as her extant writings, church records, and lifetime devotion to the Shaker church attest.

This same verse from Proverbs, "I love them that love me; and they that seek me early shall find me,"<sup>3</sup> is the one with which Mrs. Montgomery speeds Ellen on her literal and metaphoric journey toward faith and refinement. The coincidence is appealing because both girls—Warner's fictional heroine and the very real Adams—find God whether through evangelical Protestantism or through Shakerism. Both girls, too, believe that religion and moral feeling can be fostered in the proper

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<sup>1</sup> Adams, "A Holy and Divine Roll," 225.

<sup>2</sup> Whitcher, *A Brief History*, 135 (11 October 1826).

<sup>3</sup> Warner, *The Wide, Wide World*, 42.

domestic environment. While Warner places Ellen ultimately as a future wife in a single-family home, Adams discovers and articulates a domesticity both material and immaterial, a communal home without ties of biological family.<sup>4</sup>

When Susan Warner in *The Wide, Wide World* advocates the importance of textile refinement and domesticity, she sets up an ideology in competition with that of her Shaker neighbors in New York. The New Lebanon, New York Shaker village was within several miles of Warner's father's home in Canaan, New York, the site fictionalized as Queechy in her 1852 eponymous novel. One *Queechy* character (Mrs. Carleton) even reports a visit: "We have had a very satisfactory day among the Shakers."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Anna Warner cites her sister Susan's journal entry for September 14, 1836 (when Susan was seventeen years old): "How much better worth it is to stay quietly at home and read Cowper, than to see all the Shakers in the world."<sup>6</sup> She was apparently unenthusiastic to see Shaker domesticity in practice. The proliferation of Shaker villages throughout the northeast and Midwest (eighteen communities in 1845)<sup>7</sup>, however, meant that worldly and Shaker ideologies of domestic life were coming into frequent contact via members' relations with the community (legal actions as well as tamer arrivals and departures); tourist

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<sup>4</sup> Warner, despite the power available to her through fiction, never deploys the Shaker element as a threatening antithesis to her ideologies of domesticity and true womanhood. She might have, however. A part-time neighbor to the New Lebanon, New York Shaker village, she nevertheless barely alludes to the sect in her fiction as others were wont to do. Robert Michael Pugh in *A Thorn in the Text* observes that Caroline Lee Hentz, author of "The Shaker Girl," was a resident of Lancaster, Massachusetts, adjacent to both Harvard and Shirley, two towns with Shaker villages (92).

<sup>5</sup> Warner, *Queechy*, I: 74. In *Queechy*, Warner offers praise for the Quakers but offers curiously little on the nearby Shakers: Aunt Miriam Ringgan "had been brought up among the Quakers, and though now and for many years a staunch Presbyterian, she still retained a tincture of the calm efficient gentleness of mind and manner that belongs so inexplicably to them" (I: 69).

<sup>6</sup> Anna Warner, *Susan Warner ("Elizabeth Wetherell")*, 166.

<sup>7</sup> Brewer, *Shaker Communities*, before page 1.

visits and sales of goods; reportage (such as by Hawthorne and Dickens); and Shaker literature.

The Shakers did not write fictional narratives such as Warner's, but they did imagine, portray, and justify via literature their own domestic arrangements. Shaker women have left poems as well as prose gift texts, testimonies, and prophecies with which to understand their own particular revisions of middle-class domesticity and true womanhood. The life and writings of Hester Ann Adams and her Shaker contemporaries demonstrate how these women used textile work and imagery to depict their domestic roles and how textiles, in turn, enabled women's opportunities to do so. We should remember that Shakers were not unaware of worldly domestic conventions. In fine, Shakers understood the Warner version of middle-class domesticity but chose to adapt it according to their own religious precepts. This chapter focuses on the literature of Shaker women, literature through which Shaker women forged family ties, sacralized their labor, and asserted their womanhood by pursuing a domesticity that afforded them neat, stable homes and financial independence. In particular, Shaker women's literary work—and its frequent associations with women's textile work—enabled them to support a celibate, communitarian lifestyle and to create an altered version of middle-class true womanhood and domesticity. This chapter also demonstrates how Shaker women renegotiated the metaphorical and associational qualities of textiles. While Warner's Ellen Montgomery interprets and maintains refining textiles to establish class and family affiliations (and defenses), Shakers recognized that textile production and exchange could both support a communal enterprise (enabling independence) and

bridge class divisions by creating a spiritual, affectional family strengthened by shared labor and token exchange.

### **Identifying the Shakers**

The Shakers are a religious sect formed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century under the leadership of a woman who came to be called "Mother" Ann Lee. She led the group later known as the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing from England to the United States in 1774 in order to practice a millennialist religion with tenets of celibacy, spirit visitation, confession of sin, belief in a dual male/female Godhead, and, later, communal ownership of property.<sup>8</sup> Shakers believed that Christ's second appearing had taken place and that they were living in a "millennial society which would be the earthly counterpart of the perfect heavenly church."<sup>9</sup> After 1776 Shakers began to establish communities that paired aesthetics and ethics, with the belief that order and simplicity evoked finer feelings and brought people closer to God.<sup>10</sup> From the Canterbury, New Hampshire Shaker community, established in 1792, comes literature that sketches a revised pattern for womanhood, models a more expansive domesticity, and demonstrates the fluidity of materiality and immateriality, physicality and spirituality.

The creation of a textile-inspired Shaker womanhood and domesticity may be particularly traced in the life, literature, and work of one of its nineteenth-century members: Eldress Hester Ann Adams. Adams moved to the Canterbury, New

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<sup>8</sup> Promey, *Spiritual Spectacles*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Andrews & Andrews, *Visions of the Heavenly Sphere*, 63. See also Doan, *The Miller Heresy*, 13-14, on pre- and post-millennialism.

<sup>10</sup> Blinn, *The Life and Gospel Experience*, 20; Promey, *Spiritual Spectacles*, 82.

Hampshire, Shaker community from Durham at age nine in 1826.<sup>11</sup> She and two of her siblings were placed with the Shakers where they had a host of relatives, including a trustee of the village.<sup>12</sup> By age 27 in 1844, she had earned a spot as “eldress” in the Ministry overseeing the New Hampshire Shaker societies of Enfield and Canterbury where she likely also served as “tayloress” or garment maker. In 1859 she was transferred to the Maine Ministry including the villages of Poland Spring and Sabbathday Lake, where she remained until she died in 1888.<sup>13</sup> Her faithfulness and service to the Society can now be traced in her written work, including a gift image; church records; prose testimonies and prophecies; and memorandum books for fabric dyes, fabric finishes, paints, and glove and dress patterns.

Hester Ann Adams’s Shaker writings—including her 1843 prose prophecy and testimony and the well-discussed 1845 gift image (with prose text and illustrations; Figure 1) titled by its first line, “A Sheet Prepared and Written According to Mother Ann’s Directions”<sup>14</sup>—and work provide us a lens with which to analyze the threads comprising Shaker domesticity. Her writings’ reliance on descriptions and images of both everyday objects (such as garments and textiles) and imagined riches (such as diamonds) and her own lifelong work with the production and maintenance of textiles and domestic dwellings invite a material culture approach.

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<sup>11</sup> Adams joined the North Family, Canterbury, in 1825 and moved to the Church Family the following year. Whitcher, *A Brief History*, 135 (11 October 1826); Barker, “Eldress Hester,” 130; Adams, “Testimony,” 346.

<sup>12</sup> Barker, “Eldress Hester,” 131. Hester Ann was joined by her biological siblings William and Rebecca.

<sup>13</sup> Barker, “Eldress Hester,” 131; Neal, *The Shaker Image*, 223.

<sup>14</sup> Adams, “A Sheet Prepared and Written According to Mother Ann’s Directions.” Hereafter quoted in text without page citation. See Figure 1.

Material culture theory argues for the semiotic potential and even agency of objects and their literary representations. Roland Barthes, in *The Fashion System*, argues that language brings things (here, fashions) into existence. He writes, "In literature, description is brought to bear upon a hidden object (whether real or imaginary): it must make that object exist."<sup>15</sup> Adams's language creates objects that we can analyze. Why does she describe God's word as a "fuller's soap" in her 1843 testimony?<sup>16</sup> Why does she piece her 1845 narrated gift image in the form of a quilt? Why does the text of the gift image plead for Adams's attention to a "house" and its "children" when the Shakers lived in a communal dwelling and practiced celibacy? A material culture approach will clarify how Adams's textile work and imagery both enabled and justified a unique Shaker domesticity.

This chapter adds to the nineteenth-century discourse of domesticity defined in chapter one and discusses Shaker revisions of it. The chapter measures Shaker domesticity against conventional tenets. For instance, it discusses the establishment of a Shaker communal home (versus a conventional single-family home); the spiritual significance of Shaker textile industry (versus reliance on a husband's income and seclusion from the marketplace); and the creation of an alternate family structure (as opposed to traditional motherhood in a nuclear and extended family). Shaker sister Hester Ann Adams provides a model of this revised domesticity not only because of her frequent appearance in the Shaker and worldly historical record as eldress and textile worker, but also because of her own legacy of textile-inspired writings.

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<sup>15</sup> Barthes, *The Fashion System*, 12.

<sup>16</sup> Adams, "Testimony," 345.

### Relating to the World

In the mid-nineteenth century Shaker women writers used their work with literature and textiles to revise notions of true womanhood and its component, domesticity.

Shaker women were working in conjunction with a white, middle-class ideology propagated (in different ways) by advice manuals and domestic novels; these books depicted married women acting as gracious wives, mothers, and hostesses in their single-family homes. This supposedly normative literature smiled upon the nuclear family and the woman's efforts to provide a tastefully-furnished, carefully-designed home for her family's moral nurture—a home as “moral beacon” and “restorative haven”—as outlined in historian Nancy Cott's definition of middle-class domesticity.

<sup>17</sup> But I am not the first to observe that this discourse of domesticity was unavailable to all women. Non-Shaker Fanny Fern's 1855 novel *Ruth Hall*, for example, shows the fragility of domesticity in its very reliance on male income (and outside market forces, from which the home was to serve as a buffer). The protagonist and her beloved husband nestle into a tiny, embowered cottage where they raise beautiful, ringleted daughters. When Ruth's husband dies, however, he leaves them without the wherewithal to maintain the cottage. Ruth and her daughters descend into the working-class realm of cabbage-smelling boarding houses with ankle-peeking young bucks skulking by the stairwell. Domesticity, Fern suggests, is a pretty tenuous facet of womanhood. A womanhood predicated on one's domesticity is no stable,

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<sup>17</sup> Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, xviii. Mid-nineteenth-century middle-class true womanhood was predicated on four elements: purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity (Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 152). Domesticity is the system of beliefs and practices which accorded women responsibility for the physical and moral nurture of her family and its home.

independent identity at all. Historians such as Karen Hansen and Suzanne Thurman and literary scholars Amy Kaplan and Hazel Carby have argued that domesticity—an element of nineteenth-century “true womanhood”—was inaccessible to African Americans, Irish Americans, and members of the working classes such as rural farm girls or mill girls.<sup>18</sup> In fact, one could exponentially expand the list of parties excluded from the discourse: religious sects eschewing the conventional nuclear family (such as Shakers and Mormons) and other religious, ethnic, or racial groups not represented in foundational U.S. government, such as Native Americans, Latinos, Jews, and Catholics.<sup>19</sup>

Mid-nineteenth-century Shaker writings, however, use textile imagery and labor both to respond to middle-class conventions of domesticity and to carve physical and spiritual space for a more expansive definition of domesticity, one not predicated on marriage, biological motherhood, a single-family home, or distinctions of class. In fact, Shaker women adapted the discourse of domesticity.<sup>20</sup> Shaker women exchanged biological family ties for communal relationships. They maintained celibacy and provided for the village's wards rather than their own biological children; they mingled race and class. For instance, Rebecca Cox Jackson and Rebecca Perot, two African-American Shaker sisters, notably maintained a multiracial Shaker home in Philadelphia—although not without initial

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<sup>18</sup> Hansen, *A Very Social Time*, 19-20; Thurman, “O Sisters,” 4, 69; Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” 185, 198; Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Here we should note laws disqualifying certain groups from roles in the government: New Hampshire did not allow Catholics to hold elected office until legislation in 1876.

<sup>20</sup> Promey, *Spiritual Spectacles*, 127. Indeed, women joining the Shakers or members maintaining contact with their “worldly” sisters, friends, and mothers brought with them conceptions of domesticity which they may have folded into the Society.



church controversy.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Shakers came from all walks of life. Mother Hannah Kendall, eldress at Harvard, came from a wealthy family in 1781 or 1782; Hester Ann Adams came from a prominent Durham, New Hampshire family; founder Ann Lee was a former mill worker.<sup>22</sup> Shaker women nevertheless maintained the domestic training and sense of domestic environmentalism advocated in the world.

Shaker scholars have noted similarities between Shaker precepts of deportment and domestic arrangement and worldly domestic handbooks.<sup>23</sup> Their early domestic arrangements paralleled the Spartan, rigorous self-sufficiency of manuals such as Lydia Maria Child's *The American Frugal Housewife*—following garment patterns and domestic furnishings from the early days of the Shaker church and American republic. But even as non-Shaker authors praised and reviled the overscrupulous, bare neatness and quaintness of Shaker garments and furnishings, Shakers themselves were moving towards increasingly “Victorian” notions of domestic space, with mirrors, wallpaper, and personal effects.<sup>24</sup> Shakers, who hoped to “transcend” a world of goods, consecrated their worldly goods to the Shaker community; upon becoming full members, they signed a covenant passing their belongings to the church. Moreover, Shaker practices codified in Millennial Laws of 1821 and 1845, for instance, prevented (or at least discouraged) the accumulation of personal goods beyond what was shared by the Society, such as

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<sup>21</sup> Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 35-40. The Philadelphia band of Shakers finally received Watervliet Eldress Paulina Bates's sanction in 1858. In 1896, some years after Jackson's death, Perot and others removed to Watervliet once more (Humez, *Gifts of Power*, 36, 41).

<sup>22</sup> Thurman, “O Sisters,” 25; Barker, “Eldress Hester,” 131.

<sup>23</sup> Promey, *Spiritual Spectacles*, 83.

<sup>24</sup> Brewer, *Shaker Communities*, 167.

Shaker-made garments, furniture, and textile furnishings.<sup>25</sup> For example, the 1845 Millennial Laws dictated, "Window curtains should be white, or of a blue or green shade, or some very modest color, and not red, checked, striped or flowered." Indeed, this coincides with the Beecher sisters' later enthusiasms over white muslin curtains.<sup>26</sup> Here, the relation of material to immaterial, physical to spiritual becomes most prominent. Believers hold that the establishment, maintenance, and spread of Shaker villages—homes and lifestyles—prepare, even speed, the millennium.

The Shakers appreciated the metaphorical power of goods to embody spiritual principles, and their texts frequently describe the figurative transfer of "imaginary" wealth—jewels, garments, and other precious goods—from the spiritual world to the earthly one. Literary representations of valuable goods and textiles, for instance, anticipated a Shaker afterlife flush with wealth and luxury. Canterbury Elder Henry C. Blinn remarks,

When a visionist would say that the spirit of some good saint, whom we had known as one of the most self-sacrificing on earth, had sent to us a precious gem, or a jewel, or a gold chain, there certainly was an occasion for meditation.

It was fortunate, however, that they belonged to the spiritual kingdom, as no well-disciplined Shaker, would for a moment adorn

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<sup>25</sup> The 1821 Millennial Laws read, "No private interest or property is, nor can be allowed of in the Church, exclusive of wearing apparel and working tools, of which each member must have the particular care and charge of his own" (qtd. in Kirk, *The Shaker World*, 262).

<sup>26</sup> Beecher & Stowe, *The American Woman's Home*, 74.

himself with either gems or jewels, or be heard to encourage any person to make such a departure from the faith.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, Shaker archives suggest that Shaker women did exchange and treasure encouraging notes or textile keepsakes such as swatches of the Shaker foundress's apron. Shaker scholars have observed the use and variation of worldly traditions within the community of Believers. Shaker sisters, for instance, exchanged paper tokens of affection—letters of praise and encouragement—much like those exchanged by women in the world. Noted Shaker scholars Edward Deming and Faith Andrews note the use of heart- and leaf-shaped tokens, as well as paper tokens designated as “pocket handkerchiefs,” sometimes containing communications from Shaker spirits, as “keepsakes.”<sup>28</sup> The white, starched muslin caps worn by Shaker sisters also served in token exchange, and they marked membership in the Shaker community.<sup>29</sup>

Shakers believed that their physical surroundings would not only refine members' sensibilities in a type of domestic environmentalism but also enable them to transcend the physical world, anticipating heaven. While Catharine Beecher encouraged a domestic environmentalism to refine and proselytize, Shakers practiced a more performative environmentalism in which household labor and arrangements were a means of worship, demonstrations of the holy spirit among them. Shakers believed that Christ's spirit had reappeared in the church (and its members), popularly represented in the figure of Ann Lee, the Society's founder.

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<sup>27</sup> Blinn, *Spiritualism*, 33.

<sup>28</sup> Andrews & Andrews, *Visions of the Heavenly Sphere*, 56; see also Thurman, “O Sisters,” 77; Gooden, “In the Bonds,” 104.

<sup>29</sup> Thurman, “O Sisters,” 76-77.

This meant that the church was marking millennial time and that their domestic arrangements were spiritual as well as physical. Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews explain the Shakers' dedicated and "tireless seeking for union with the divine: the goal, a millennial society which would be the earthly counterpart of the perfect heavenly church."<sup>30</sup> Sally Promey identifies how Shaker texts indicate "parallels between heavenly order and communal order."<sup>31</sup> In short, the domestic arrangements of the Shaker community not only modeled but enacted a heavenly order honoring Christ's second coming. More important, women's domestic and textile labor—exalted in Shaker women's texts and church rituals—effected this heaven on earth.

The extant writings of Eldress Hester Ann Adams range from the 1840s through her maintenance of the Maine *Church Record* into the late 1880s. These records vaguely refer to Adams's occasional receipt of "gifts" in the form of spirit visitations by biblical figures and deceased members of the Shaker church, not unthinkable events in the Shaker church. Shaker scholar Mark Holloway explains, "[S]ince the Day of Judgment had occurred at the foundation of their Church, they considered that they were living in the Resurrection Order, surrounded by, and in communion with, the spirits of the dead."<sup>32</sup> At least as early as 1842 and as late as 1878, Adams was acting as medium for spirit visitations whose content she conveyed to fellow Believers.<sup>33</sup> Most of her gifts remain unspecified, but three key, written texts include a testimony and a prophecy printed in Shaker Philemon

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<sup>30</sup> Andrews & Andrews, *Visions of the Heavenly Sphere*, 63.

<sup>31</sup> Promey, *Spiritual Spectacles*, 66.

<sup>32</sup> Holloway, *Heavens on Earth*, 65.

<sup>33</sup> Whitcher, *A Brief History*, 180, 181; [Sabbathday Lake] *Ministry Correspondence* vol. 2, 358 (12 November 1878).

Stewart's 1843 collected tome and an 1845 colorful graphic text, or "gift image," now preserved at Sabbathday Lake, Maine. This textile-inspired gift image reimagines domesticity via Shaker textiles.

Gift images are the documents constructed by Shaker recipients of spirit visitations. Not only did the Shaker medium receive the inspiration as a gift, she also passed on this experience as a gift to other Believers. Shaker scholars define a gift image as the "combination of painting, drawing, and visually organized text" committed to paper during an eruption of spiritual energy around the 1840s.<sup>34</sup> Although the 1845 Millennial Laws prohibited the display of art, they did not prevent the conservation and appreciation of these texts over time. The fact that so many have survived to present day suggests their value to Believers. Andrews and Andrews, however, tell a story of their discovery of this art only when a Shaker sister shyly showed a cache of such images considered eccentric by twentieth-century standards. Andrews and Andrews suggest that handfals may have been lost in a purging of the Shaker record.<sup>35</sup> Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews in *Visions of the Heavenly Sphere: A Study in Shaker Religious Art* (1969) classify these works in five types: (a) "sacred sheets," (b) "beginning of articulate symbolism," (c) "leaf and heart rewards," (d) "floral and arboreal" drawings, and (e) "major drawings with varied symbols."<sup>36</sup> Adams's 1845 gift image falls into the "beginning of articulate symbolism" category. It consists of geometrical blocks of text and illustration that narrate a spirit visitation received by Adams in January

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<sup>34</sup> Promey, *Spiritual Spectacles*, xvii.

<sup>35</sup> Andrews & Andrews, *Visions of the Heavenly Sphere*, 3.

<sup>36</sup> Andrews & Andrews, *Visions of the Heavenly Sphere*, 69, 74, 75, 87.

1845. Adams begins the text, "A sheet prepared and written according to Mother Ann's directions by one of her little Messengers."

### **Promoting Domesticity via the Shaker Home**

Although Adams's handwriting in the image is clear and legible, it is so arranged within assorted geometric shapes and orientations that the order in which it should be read is initially unclear. Nevertheless, the text carries an inherent narrative of the appearance of Mother Ann Lee and her interlude with Adams at Canterbury in a beautiful outdoor site of worship named Pleasant Grove.<sup>37</sup> The order is apparent when Mother Ann explains her choice of Adams as an instrument and then offers a self-interruption: "but hearken for a moment unto thy Fathers William and James, and then I will finish speaking." William Lee (Mother Ann's brother) and James Whittaker (who first suggested the formation of Shakers into communities with common meetinghouses<sup>38</sup>), as well as Brother Garret K. Lawrence, Sister Clarissa Winkley, and biblical figures Elisha, Benjamin, and Job—all deceased—speak again through the medium of Adams's gift image.

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<sup>37</sup> Pleasant Grove was Canterbury's outdoor site of worship suggested in 1842 by the Central Ministry and adorned from 1848 to 1861 with a white marble fountain stone. Pleasant Grove's use was discontinued after that time (Andrews & Andrews, *Visions of the Heavenly Sphere*, 21; Frost, *The Shaker Story*, 18). The idea, perhaps based on Revelation 2:17 ("He that hath an ear, let him hear what the spirit saith unto the churches; to him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth [it]"), was to install a white marble stone as a site of outdoor services. The stone was "six feet high, three feet wide and three inches thick" (Frost, *The Shaker Story*, 18). Blinn, in his *Church Record*, also notes that the Shakers erected a separate stone for negro spirits ([*Canterbury*] *Church Record*, 40).

<sup>38</sup> Procter-Smith, *Women in Shaker Community and Worship*, 39.

The employment of Shaker luminaries from the so-called first generation in gift images was quite common in fact.<sup>39</sup> Garret K. Lawrence, although not of the founding generation of Shakers, was a prominent figure in his own right. Lawrence published "A Visionary Dream by Garrett K. Lawrence, Jan. 6, 1818," in which he recounts his struggles against carnal propensities.<sup>40</sup> Lawrence also worked with the medicinal herbs industry at the New Lebanon community.<sup>41</sup> Lawrence is a Shaker spirit whom Adams had met in life ten years earlier, in 1835; in fact, he provided her with dye recipes she recorded in an extant receipt book.<sup>42</sup> Adams herself was responsible for the design of women's fancy goods for sale around New England, and she maintained a careful book of dye recipes which she rated with comments such as "one of the most beautiful and convenient ways" or "Verdigris, or blue Vitriol (we prefer blue vitriol)" or "not good."<sup>43</sup> Clarissa Winkley was a Shaker sister at Canterbury who also hailed from Adams's hometown of Durham, New Hampshire. Almost six years older than Hester Ann, Clarissa was born in 1811 and died in 1828 from consumption. The two surely knew each other during their residence at Canterbury, and possibly from Durham previously.

Acting as Adams's spiritual "parents," they urge her to act as a mother to her Shaker brethren and to "build up" the Shakers' house on earth. The house,

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<sup>39</sup> Procter-Smith, *Women in Shaker Community and Worship*, 183.

<sup>40</sup> In Lawrence's vision, a "stranger then advises him how to overcome the lusts of the flesh. 'When these things come into your mind, you should turn your sense to your duty, & always have something that is beneficial and useful to do.' In a flood of tears, Lawrence feels a 'gift of repentance.' 'All doubts were vanished from me. I awoke in tears, and continued crying for an hour, feeling that God was at work with me,'" (Lawrence qtd. in Sasson, *The Shaker Spiritual Narrative*, 36-37; see also Kirk, *The Shaker World*, 146-147).

<sup>41</sup> Kirk, *The Shaker World*, 146.

<sup>42</sup> Whitcher, *A Brief History*, 164. Kirk reports that Garrett Lawrence (note the different spelling from Adams's), a physician at New Lebanon, died in 1837. According to Lawrence's friend Isaac Newton Youngs, as of 1838, Lawrence's spirit had appeared at least "40 times" (*The Shaker World*, 186).

<sup>43</sup> Adams, *Memorandum Book*.

representing both the dwelling house and its members, is the physical manifestation of the spiritual dwelling after which it is to be patterned. To attend to one is to attend to the other. The gift image thus serves as a pattern for Shaker domesticity, and its very composition enacts the divine command and protects the Shaker home. They caution her and other Believers to “flinch not,” “obey and honor,” “walk yet more humbly,” and “change apparel.” They warn her of forthcoming trials, and they praise her faithfulness and leadership. Adams’s receipt of this gift not only accords her the authority of being the chosen recipient but also indicates her lifelong devotion to examining and strengthening her faith.

In the third horizontal bar of text from the top, Mother Ann Lee justifies Adams’s selection as the medium of this spiritual gift. Mother Ann says,

Because thou didst seek me early, by innocent and humble entreaties,  
I did remember thee: I selected thee out from among many and  
 brought thee up unto my zion on earth, to be an ornament therein; and  
 because thou didst walk honorably, I found it good to notice thee even  
 as I first intended, and in accordance thereto, numbered thee a Mortal  
Agent of my word: revealed myself unto thee through means best  
 calculated to reach thy young and inexperienced mind, by which thou  
 didst grow in knowledge and grace, and hast become serviceable and  
 well accepted in my house on earth, saith your Father Jehovah, and let  
 this word be your comfort thro time.

This passage offers a variation to the domesticity of middle-class true womanhood.

Adams does not act as what Cott calls a “self-abnegating wife and mother” but as



what Mother Ann labels, “a Mortal Agent of my word,” “an ornament,” “serviceable and well accepted.” The claim, expressed through Mother Ann’s voice, is a rather startling, assertive declaration of Adams’s worthiness and (perhaps ironically) humble faith. As an agent, Adams’s influence extends beyond the realm of a home or dwelling house; as an approved messenger, an agent of Mother Ann’s voice, Adams becomes a spiritual force in the entire Shaker community.<sup>44</sup> A Shaker woman’s power is not confined in a single-family home bounded by the “world” and competitive market but is extended over an entire community whose spiritual and physical needs she serves.

In the midst of the text of Mother Ann’s conversation with Adams, represented in the concentric squares in the upper left, Adams draws a Shaker dwelling house, recognizable for its yellow color indicated by the 1821 and 1845 Millennial Laws and prescribed in Adams’s own book of dye and paint recipes. The Millennial Laws were to provide guidelines for the Shaker community as it built its heaven on earth. They recommended white meeting houses with other buildings distinguishably darker in, “as near uniform in color, as consistent; but it is advisable to have shops of a little darker shade than dwelling houses.”<sup>45</sup> This code of paint colors (which was eventually abandoned) enabled visitors, either from the world or from other Shaker villages, to “read” the layout of the village, to identify the sphere of one’s work. Adams herself helped to maintain the village organization; she kept a recipe book for the renewal of dyes and paints, including a yellow dwelling house paint comprised of

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<sup>44</sup> Mother Ann Lee also defended her right to preach, arguing “the right of government belongs to the woman’ when her husband or male head [Christ] is absent” (Bishop & Wells, 21 qtd. in Thurman, “O Sisters,” 60).

<sup>45</sup> Nicoletta, *The Architecture of the Shakers*, 53; Schiffer, *Shaker Architecture*, 9; and Kirk, *The Shaker World*, 134-135.

125 pounds of White Lead,  
 6 [pounds] of French Yellow,  
 6 [pounds] of Green Chrome,  
 2 1/2 [pounds] of Yellow [Chrome].<sup>46</sup>

Women were in fact guardians of the home in both physical and spiritual senses. Not only would the lead paint preserve the clapboards of the Federal style Canterbury dwelling houses, it also symbolized the spiritual preservation of the Shaker community or “zion” as Adams calls it in her writings.<sup>47</sup> In fact, in her gift image, she refers repeatedly to her personal responsibility for the Shaker house—the physical dwelling house as well as the spiritual community. Adams tends Mother Ann’s “house on earth” by literally preparing its paint, softening its interiors with textiles, and clothing its inhabitants, duties she fulfilled as a Shaker sister.

Adams’s depiction of a Shaker dwelling house and, at the bottom margin, the grove of trees surrounding the outdoor site of worship suggests the decentering of the Shaker church and an understanding that the church—and Mother Ann’s spirit—resides in Believers. Thus, Adams draws a dwelling house rather than a meeting house; the home, then, serves as a reminder that spirituality is achieved through union with other Believers in a communal setting. Adams’s use of a Shaker dwelling house as a metonym for the church sacralizes the house as well as the female labor used to sustain it.

Adams urges Shakers to welcome non-Believers into their home and their church; her command is a type of Shaker hospitality by which guests enter not just a

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<sup>46</sup> Adams, *Memorandum Book*.

<sup>47</sup> Nicoletta, *The Architecture of the Shakers*, 52.

home but a Christian community. The text caption to the house illustration reads in black ink, "Open thy windows and thy doors and receive whomever is sent." Her text echoes the words of Shaker Calvin Green who described the flurry of spiritual gifts during the period of 1837 to 1847. He writes, "it seems as tho the very doors and windows of heaven were opened. And Divine gifts, heavenly visions, and holy manifestations abounded."<sup>48</sup> This spiritual revival known as the Era of Manifestations or Mother Ann's Work may have stemmed from the desire to recapture the energy and fervor of the early Shaker movement since many of the Shakers of Adams's time had never met the dynamic founder Mother Ann Lee nor her first-generation founding associates.<sup>49</sup>

Adams's gift image also appears at a time of steep gains and losses in membership, and perhaps her "hospitality" encourages assimilation of other Protestant sects. The economic Panic of 1837 and the turmoil that followed may have reaffirmed the benefits of communal Shaker principles and lured new believers.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, a Canterbury Shaker journal writer noted the increasingly frequent failure of businesses at this time.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, a group known as the Millerites had been preparing for Christ's second coming and the "end of the world" sometime in 1843 or 1844. When Christ failed to materialize on the predicted dates, some disappointed Millerites moved into Shaker communities and may have challenged Shaker tenets such as the dual Godhead.<sup>52</sup> Adams prepares to

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<sup>48</sup> Green qtd. in Promey, *Spiritual Spectacles*, 85.

<sup>49</sup> Promey, *Spiritual Spectacles*, 8.

<sup>50</sup> Foster, "Had Prophecy Failed?," 179.

<sup>51</sup> Winkley, *Diary*, 22 May 1837.

<sup>52</sup> Charles Edson Robinson observed of the Millerites:

And my memory of the Shakers becomes more vivid as I recall the Second Advent craze which passed over New England a little later on, and caused so large a number

welcome all people and spirits into the Shaker community. Here, Shakers and converts will form a new faith and home that, in Adams's portrayal at least, seems uniquely gendered.

In Adams's gift image, Adams herself becomes not only a worker within the home but a builder of it.<sup>53</sup> Adams's and other women's gendered spheres of labor attain spiritual stature. This construct would seem to echo conventional middle-class domesticity's "Angel in the House" motif, but Shaker women's gift texts and rituals performatively assert a spiritual authority. Mother Ann exhorts Adams, "be wholly devoted to the up building of the Church of God, to watch over and protect all that shall be called up hither to learn of my gospel." The physical house and the spiritual house envisioned in heaven become curiously conflated as the material becomes a means of attaining the immaterial. Adams thus becomes the guardian of an expanded domesticity—a guardian of not just a single family home but a whole dwelling house, not just a physical home but a spiritual home as well for the approximately 132 Believers living at the Church family in Canterbury in 1839, for example.<sup>54</sup> Adams models a Shaker form of domesticity in which she acts as a mother to her community of Believers. She chastens them gently, delivering her

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of worthy individuals, believers in the 'Miller doctrine,' to neglect all worldly business and give themselves up solely to religious services; of their giving away all their earthly possessions; of their assembling in the old churchyard cemetery in Concord, N.H., on the memorable day of the 23d of April, 1843, clothed in white raiments, to witness the second advent of the Son of Man in the heavens, and by him to be caught up in the air with the rising 'dead in the Lord,' as the graves would open at the blast of Gabriel's trumpet, and they depart with him to everlasting joy, leaving behind the earth and all things earthly to be destroyed with unquenchable fire. Alas! poor deluded souls! the day and night passed with no unusual occurrence. (Robinson, *The Shakers and their Homes*, 104)

<sup>53</sup> Just as Adams's gift image could guard her community in its spiritual progress, she herself could guard her community in its physical condition. Sister Barker writes that Adams could, "in the words of Elder John B. Vance of Alfred, Maine 'build up the waste places and restore the walls of gospel protection'" (Barker, "Eldress Hester," 131).

<sup>54</sup> Whitcher, *A Brief History*, 175.

spirit message in a form that requires effort on the part of those who seek it. She delivers her message in a textile-inspired form, a “sheet” composed as a sort of paper quilt or token echoing the sort of industry by which Shaker women support a communal home and property ownership. The pink, double-scored ink border even echoes the cross-hatching on Shaker neckerchief borders.<sup>55</sup>

Shaker women’s textile production and other domestic labor also achieved salvific, immaterial status. Since the Shaker communal home represented an eventual spiritual, heavenly home, work on the home was work on the divine—materiality achieving immateriality. A Shaker inspired song and activity called the “cleansing gift” also suggests the power of the material to achieve the immaterial. In December 1841, an inspired message provoked a new ritual popularly called the “cleansing” or “sweeping” gift. Men and women moved through their dwelling houses, singing and sweeping and thus enacting a self-purification from sin and earthliness represented in the dust and dirt. Marjorie Procter-Smith argues that these gifts, “which combined actual and metaphorical cleaning, and ‘The Midnight Cry,’ which involved solely metaphorical cleaning, claimed women’s daily work as revelatory sign of God’s purifying power and activity.”<sup>56</sup> Women’s work was thus accorded “sacred status.”<sup>57</sup> The ending of the song to accompany this gift ran,

Wash, wash, clean, clean, clean, clean.

Scour and scrub, scour and scrub

From this floor the stains of sin.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Kirk, “Contextualizing,” 107.

<sup>56</sup> Procter-Smith, “Shakerism and Feminism,” 14.

<sup>57</sup> Procter-Smith, “Shakerism and Feminism,” 14.

<sup>58</sup> Procter-Smith, *Women in Shaker Community and Worship*, 188.

Anthropologist and material culture theorist Lynn Meskell, through her studies of ancient Egyptian artifacts and rituals, offers insight into Shaker rituals such as worship songs and dances whose performance reinvests women's domestic labor with difference: special spiritual meaning as well as affectional associations of shared worship and work.<sup>59</sup>

### **Fostering Spirituality through Textile-Inspired Texts**

Shaker women's industries—such as textile production, garment construction, and textile maintenance, as well as cooking, cleaning, and gardening—made possible the upbuilding of the Shaker communal home. Moreover, their pre-industrial, non-alienated, communal labor allowed women to see themselves in their work. Each garment constructed, each gift text rendered, later, each poplarware sewing box made for sale—each very visibly contributed to the material welfare and spiritual security of the community.

Adams's creation of an inspired gift image is also, arguably, her self-creation as a Shaker mother, a guide in spiritual as well as material matters. Her text announces to fellow Believers her newly accorded identity, but it also rallies Shaker devotion. Daniel Miller's notion of "objectification" analyzes the relationship between a subject and the object she creates. He notes "the dialectics of objectification" by which subjects and objects affect each other. He points out that current material culture theorists have threefold work:

The first is to acknowledge the central role played in history by the desire to transcend and repudiate materiality. The second is to

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<sup>59</sup> Meskell, "Objects in the Mirror."

consider the consequence of acknowledging this fact and subsequently accepting materiality and to go on to explore the nuances, relativism, and plural nature of both materiality and immateriality. The third is to follow through the most radical of these implications, which leads us to repudiate the privilege accorded to a humanity defined by its opposition to materiality as pure subject or social relations.<sup>60</sup>

Miller's theories explain Adams's assumption of authority and urgency—the need to convey a divine message via a corporeal text of paper and ink and to witness the renewed energy of her Shaker audience. The material form of the gift image summons material imagery (of a dwelling house, flowers, staff, etc.) to evoke transcendence. Adams's labor in "copying" the text and other Shakers' labor in deciphering it produce or affirm faith in the Resurrection Order through which material practices on earth merely mirror imminent heavenly order.

As if to reassert women's role in the Shaker endeavor, gift images were almost the exclusive realm of the Sisters. Considering the gendered nature of gift image production in light of Daniel Miller's work suggests something about Shaker women's desires for subjectivity. Perhaps they consciously or unconsciously hoped to establish female spiritual authority—a material production of spirituality. According to Daniel Patterson's 1983 account, almost ninety-seven per cent of the gift images were produced by women.<sup>61</sup> As such, the gifts may also have been a subversive means of asserting women's importance in the church—of emphasizing

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<sup>60</sup> Miller, "Materiality: An Introduction," 41.

<sup>61</sup> Patterson, *Gift Drawing*, 42+; Brewer, "'Tho' of the Weaker Sex,'" 137-138.

the significance of women's industry and spiritual authority.<sup>62</sup> Marjorie Procter-Smith, in *Women in Shaker Community and Worship: A Feminist Analysis of the Uses of Religious Symbolism* (1985), cautions against paeans to Shakers' feminism although she locates elements of feminism in particular periods of Shaker history.<sup>63</sup> Shakers, for instance, maintained gendered spheres of labor, and Adams's assumption of the male voice in her gift image may indicate Shaker resistance to female authority in the church. Despite parallels of Shaker practice to conventional true womanly domesticity and to feminism, Shaker women seemed to have walked a middle line of limited financial independence (women were not allowed to serve as trustees until 1880<sup>64</sup>) and female leadership exalted by textile work and references.

Mother Ann's literary conveyance of this gift endows Adams with spiritual authority and biblical countenance in the face of her work as Shaker eldress. Elisha speaks directly in her gift image. In blue ink above the heart, he gives her "A Staff of Love from Jesus Christ the Savior given to Hester A. Adams by Elisha the prophet whereon to lean in tribulation." This staff is the one with which Elisha conducts miracles during the course of his long ministry.<sup>65</sup> (The blue ink, in the understanding of Brother Calvin Green, represented heaven.<sup>66</sup>) In another section written vertically in dark ink, Elisha warns Adams not to falter in proclaiming the word of God. Procter-Smith explains that men of this period would have had instruction in public speaking; Adams' use of male voices seems to "borrow" this ability or right to

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<sup>62</sup> Brewer, "'Tho' of the Weaker Sex," 133.

<sup>63</sup> Procter-Smith, "Shakerism and Feminism," 3-5.

<sup>64</sup> Nickless & Nickless, "Sexual Equality and Economic Authority," 129.

<sup>65</sup> Of Elisha, the Bible says, "Then he said to Gehazi, gird up thy loins, and take my staff in thine hand, and go thy way: if thou meet any man, salute him not; and if any salute thee, answer him not again; and lay my staff upon the face of the child" (2 Kings 4:29).

<sup>66</sup> Kirk, *The Shaker World*, 131.



enter the public sphere.<sup>67</sup> As if anticipating people's challenge to Adams's assumption of the male voice, Elisha preaches perseverance. Elisha queries, "Shall I flinch from my duty and discontinue the sound? Not so. But as my God commandeth so will I perform, that I may prove unto Him a faithful Servant." His words urge her to remain steady and unflinching, "a faithful Servant" even in the face of unbelief. Thus endorsed by an Old Testament prophet who warns Adams of doubters and trials, her gift image has authority. In her 1845 gift image and 1843 prophecy and testimony, Adams veils her writing in the voices of Shaker spirits and biblical figures; she also employs language that mimics the Bible's occasionally portentous style. Her image, for instance, uses antiquated verb endings ("saith your Father Jehovah" and "She careth not to give due thanks unto her God"); delivers omniscient warnings ("And then will zion receive a fullness of trial"); and in the case of the prophecy, divides into thirty-three enumerated points and warnings, much like Bible verses. These suggest Adams's divine power to know the future and the authority to deliver it. Her 1843 prophecy uses a first-person point of view which merges Elisha's and Hester's voices. Moreover, Adams several times preempts doubt. In her 1843 prophecy, "A Holy and Divine Roll, Written by the Holy Prophet Elisha, Before the Altar of Wisdom and Love, December 14, 1842," Adams (via Elisha) warns, "If ye know not how to treat the givings of his Spirit, then be wise and mock not his word, lest in his fury He cast you off forever."<sup>68</sup> In the area below the heart on the 1845 gift image, Mother Ann shows how the word achieves materiality. She says,

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<sup>67</sup> Procter-Smith, *Women in Shaker Community*, 141.

<sup>68</sup> Adams, "A Holy and Divine Roll," 229.

what I say unto thee, is thy own, and will remain with thee: for I am not speaking unto one who is merely a hearer of the word, but I am speaking to one who heareth the word, and then *careth to obey*. Thou hast *acted well* thy part, for which thou hast my love and blessing: still move on in the gift of God, striving daily and hourly to do his will more than that of man or woman. And as ye move, let the wisdom of your Eternal Mother guide you in all you do. (emphasis added)

Mother Ann's quoted lesson suggests the word as having material presence in the textual memory of her interlude with Adams and as appearing in the world as action. And because many of Adams's duties are textile-related, they are part of her spiritual action and leadership.

Prophecies, testimonies, and gift images, as well as textiles produced by Shaker women demonstrate the fluidity between materiality and immateriality—between the physical text and its divine work. Moreover, gift images are markers of faith; in short, they are transformative to those who produce and receive them. The text may appeal to the spiritual world, much as a ritual (such as the famous Shaker cleansing gift), where the performance brings one closer to God. On the other hand, the immaterial—one's faith or spiritual security—is made material on these pages, made accessible via instructive text or biblical metaphor.

Shaker women frequently linked spiritual attainment with textile imagery drawn from the Bible. Promey explains, "Not only did shapes and their organization bind Believers to the heavenly pattern, but the skillful use of metaphorical

constructions produced fruitful comparisons between heaven and earth.”<sup>69</sup> Adams’s predecessor in the Ministry, Canterbury Eldress Esther Ferrin wrote inspired sheets (without illustration), one titled “Heavenly Garment,” one of several “Gold Leaves from Mother Ann to Eldress Esther and Harriet.” Ferrin writes, “Holy Angels are hovering around with a glorious garment of love from the heavenly Paradise above. The more faithful souls this garment do wear the brighter it grows, the more it shines. It is purity & peace, love, love, holy love that will ever increase.”<sup>70</sup> The paper creates the “glorious garment of love” out of spiritual inspiration. In fact, the gift text continues with invented language as feelings burst forth into another language. The figurative garment, conjured in the text, represents the “holy love” that Believers can don like a cloak. This material representation of an immaterial faith makes it accessible; Believers sustain each other as a community, all caring for the garment, or faith. Moreover, as it draws on biblical language of “garments,” it also accords a figurative, spiritual dimension to women’s labor on textiles and garments. The garment, Ferrin continues, “is the reward of your labors on earth; / A heavenly garment, a crown of great worth.” These works solidify authority and exhort the community to unite in times of trial; moreover, they relate women’s textile work to spiritual attainment.

Adams’s 1845 gift image is an act of joyous labor as it draws on a female textile tradition, piecing, quiltilike, the patches of text and thus comparing textile work to the spiritual work of reconstructing a gift. The gift draws on female knowledge as the proper vehicle of religious text. Adams’s careful placement of shapes, images,

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<sup>69</sup> Promey, *Spiritual Spectacles*, 77-78.

<sup>70</sup> Ferrin, “Heavenly Garment.”

and text is an act of labor—a means of coping with and endeavoring to be worthy of a divine message. Adams uses a ruler and compass, also tools of her trade as what the Shakers called a “tayloress,” as evidenced by the pencil marks still visible beneath some of the ink on the large paper measuring 20 ½ inches tall by 15 ¾ inches wide.<sup>71</sup> Also, she carefully alternates ink colors in a practice reminiscent of her role as textile dyer. According to her memorandum book of dye recipes, Adams dyed material into colors such as pink, scarlet, blue, and green, and whitened silk kerchiefs to “lily white”; she produced paints for the yellow dwelling houses and white meetinghouses. These colors recur in her gift image.<sup>72</sup> In other words, the gift image was not the act of spirits speaking “through” Adams in an “automatic” or “spiritistic” sense (as in a frenzied bout of creation), but rather the act of spirits speaking “by” Adams and her natural capabilities.<sup>73</sup> She pieces the image together in a process that very much resembles the placing of a paper clothing pattern on cloth, the fusing of quilt pieces, the composing of a sampler, or the exchanging of tokens.<sup>74</sup> The patches of text and image butt against each other without spare white space. Adams makes prudent use of the entire paper; she wastes not an inch.

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<sup>71</sup> Patterson, *Gift Drawing*, 47, and Andrews & Andrews, *Visions of the Heavenly Sphere*, 118.

<sup>72</sup> Sally Promey explains, “But all Shakers believed that colors signified something beyond themselves. Among Believers, black, red, and white, especially, demonstrated symbolic possibilities. Black usually implied judgment, solemn warnings, and darkness, red the sufferings, persecution, and tribulation preparatory to salvation, and white purity, peace, hope, and blessing” (Promey, *Spiritual Spectacles*, 31).

<sup>73</sup> Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews, in their book *Visions of the Heavenly Sphere: A Study in Shaker Religious Art*, report that gift images are “certainly neither automatic nor spiritistic” (62). Sally M. Promey, in her book *Spiritual Spectacles*, iterates, “In the case of gift images, however, the instrument always ‘saw’ the visions she drew; the figures did not just flow through her” (116).

<sup>74</sup> Kirk, “Contextualizing,” 107; Kitch, “As a Sign,” 13.

Shakers are famous for their prudent use of resources.<sup>75</sup> Eldress

Cassandana Goodrich of Hancock, Massachusetts used to counsel against waste of materials or failure to mend. She used to say, "I know the way of God [...] cannot be kept in such a careless sense."<sup>76</sup> Shakers recalled the eldress's advice:

She said we must look and consider how we cut our cloth [a member recalled] and be prudent even if we had to piece a little more to save, for it was our hard earnings and we ought to be careful and not lavish or wasteful. And in making our clothes, we ought to be prudent and saving of our thread, and sew that which was proper and not make too free use of silk, for it was costly and did not ought to be used where [cotton] thread would do.

And in mending our clothes, she was very particular. She taught us to mend them in season, and not let them go till it would take double the time, cloth and thread to repair them.<sup>77</sup>

Women's labor with textiles was crucial to their livelihood as communal Shakers. If indeed Believers were creating a Resurrection Order of heaven on earth, then their labor on the community's garments and textile furnishings was an aspect of that perfection, a spiritual work. Moreover, women's careful attention to textiles not only showed adherence to Shaker gospel orders or rules; it also showed their dedication to financial independence.

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<sup>75</sup> "We like to see fragments / Left wholesome and neat" ("Table Monitor"); "It is a sin to waste soap, or anything else that god has given you. If you knew the torments of hell, you would fear God in all you do and say" (Mother Ann qtd. by Slosson qtd. in Humez, *Mother's First-Born Daughter*, 24).

<sup>76</sup> Andrews, *The Hancock Shakers*, 25.

<sup>77</sup> Andrews, *The Hancock Shakers*, 24.

The vibrancy of Adams's drawing provides a sharp contrast to the colorlessness and grimness asserted by Shaker critics and worldly writers. Charles Dickens, in his *American Notes* (1842), notes that his visit to the New Lebanon, New York Shaker village turned up "grim" and "wooden" Shaker specimens, the women particularly homely.<sup>78</sup> Non-shaker authors of fiction created stock Shakers, anemic and passionless. Caroline Hentz, in her short story "The Shaker Girl" (1839), shivers at Shakers' "chill and ghost-like attire," their skin "colourless as marble." She notes the "shroud-like garments" and "hue-less, passionless faces," "still and ghastly."<sup>79</sup> Hawthorne's doomed heroine of "The Shaker Bridal" (1851) is "thin and pale, as a Shaker sister almost invariably is, and not entirely free from that corpse-like appearance, which the garb of the sisterhood is so well calculated to impart."<sup>80</sup> Much later, Charles Sherman Haight's "A Shaker Romance" (1895) describes the Shaker village as a "living grave" for the beautiful young maiden he discovers there.<sup>81</sup> But Adams's and Ferrin's joyous texts of gold-tinged garments and exuberant inks show that Shaker life is anything but colorless and grave. They celebrate the vibrancy of the natural world, using ultramarine blue, apple green, and buttery gold to decorate furniture and trim, and in the spiritual brotherhood and sisterhood afforded in the Shaker community.

And although Shakers eschewed wealthy tokens of their familial relationships, they drew on these worldly objects in metaphorical ways. In the gift image, Adams receives a "Basket of flowers" and "A diamond of Love," both illustrated. The

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<sup>78</sup> Dickens, *American Notes*, 312-316.

<sup>79</sup> Hentz, "The Shaker Girl," 2 of 14.

<sup>80</sup> Hawthorne, "A Shaker Bridal," 217.

<sup>81</sup> Haight, "A Shaker Romance," 627.

diamond, a gift from Sister Clarissa Winkley, provides a piece of treasure that Shakers did not value on earth but anticipated enjoying in heaven since such treasures were prohibited by communal laws.<sup>82</sup> With its dots, the diamond also resembles the Shaker dance pattern for worship, "Changeable Marches" or "[a] design for standing within the second New Lebanon meetinghouse."<sup>83</sup> Adams's gift image reinforces the divine nature of earthly practices when she draws the diamond gift. Julie Nicoletta, in *The Architecture of the Shakers* (1995), explains how the square diamond-shape also appears in Father Joseph Meacham's architectural design:

Meacham also encouraged physical perfection through square forms and straight lines. Building within 'church order' meant that walls should meet at right angles and have square or rectangular plans. Paths were laid at right angles so that members would not take diagonal shortcuts across door yards. A dance called the 'Square Order Shuffle' emphasized the order embodied in the square.<sup>84</sup>

Shaker scholar John T. Kirk compares the gift images to other Shaker productions such as dance patterns, Shaker oval boxes, Hancock's round barn, and square textiles such as neckerchiefs. He places these Shaker productions "neatly within the Enlightenment-inspired, neoclassical style vocabulary of grids, tightly contained units (squares, rectangles, circles, and ovals), and linear arrangements."<sup>85</sup> He sees an

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<sup>82</sup> Andrews & Andrews, *Visions of the Heavenly Sphere*, 56.

<sup>83</sup> Kirk, *The Shaker World*, 78; Kirk, "Contextualizing," 106.

<sup>84</sup> Nicoletta, *The Architecture of the Shakers*, 36.

<sup>85</sup> Kirk, "Contextualizing," 101.

integrated sense of design that influences Shaker productions, even Hester Ann Adams's gift image. He notes, however, the inherent tension of order and ecstasy:

It should be understood, however, that while rationality was the goal of Shaker living patterns, it was contrary to the expectations of the experimental faith that valued unfolding spiritual knowledge, often through ecstasy and spirit manifestations. The tension between these two strong drives, order and openness, created much of what we now call Classic Shaker.<sup>86</sup>

Adams's image itself embodies such a tension. Received via inspiration, it nevertheless demanded a labor investment of time and artistry. It also required Ministry approval. Divine inspiration was not necessarily autonomous.

### **Promoting a Revised (Shaker) Domesticity**

Shaker communities created a pattern of domesticity available to all women, married or not, working class or otherwise, and provided permanence of domicile, one furnished and softened with textile furnishings such as Shaker-made coverlets and muslin curtains so exalted in non-Shaker handbooks of domestic economy.<sup>87</sup> While, on the one hand, Shakers maintained gender-separate dwellings and division of labor, they also pursued an "androgynous ideal" as a means to spiritual perfection.<sup>88</sup> Celibacy as well as attempts at gender parity in society leadership

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<sup>86</sup> Kirk, "Contextualizing," 102.

<sup>87</sup> Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, in *The American Woman's Home*, declare that "White curtains really create a room out of nothing" (74). Later, Amanda Harris notes in a Shaker building "the carefully ironed muslin curtains, which slip on rings, are folded like a napkin and laid up over the rod from which they are suspended" (Harris, "Among the Shakers," 22).

<sup>88</sup> Thurman, "O Sisters," 56. This ideal enabled females, for instance, to assume "male" roles such as speaking in meeting (57).



“granted the sisters access to social roles other than wife and mother.”<sup>89</sup> Shaker men and women shared duties of worship, leadership, financial trusteeship, and child-care-taking. Otherwise, though, the Shakers pursued an organized form of division of labor in which males tended large crops and farm animals, and formed and mended implements, for example. Women prepared food and tended to textiles.<sup>90</sup> Historian Edward Deming Andrews explains that Shakers raised the flax and sheep necessary for textile production and garment manufacture and carried out every step in the process.<sup>91</sup> Kentucky Shaker women also collected silk cocoons for silk fabric production.<sup>92</sup> Adams and her Shaker sisters spun and wove, first on hand looms and later on power looms; they dyed and finished textiles. They constructed Shaker garments for the men and women, and they did the laundry. Work with textile industries yielded a way for women to support themselves.<sup>93</sup>

Adams promoted a revised Shaker domesticity through her textile work. Shaker and historian Henry C. Blinn writes in the *Canterbury Church Record* that “In 1842 they began to weave the 25th of March, and closed, Jan., 31, 1843. Whole amount 2496 yds. The looms were placed in the Sister’s shop & the weaving was done by hand till Aug. 1848.”<sup>94</sup> Adams was an office sister at this time, helping to

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<sup>89</sup> Thurman, “O Sisters,” 56.

<sup>90</sup> In the early formation of the Canterbury Shaker community, “the women began to weave, spin, and cook; the men, to cut wood and lumber. Textile related jobs of the early Shakers included, for the sisters, setting card teeth, carding, hatching, spinning, weaving, dyeing, and fashioning garments; for the brothers, making looms, wheels, wool wheels, clock reels, shuttles, and tools for linen processing, and raising flax” (*Shaker Products*, n.p.). See also Swank, *Shaker Life*, 192, 190-197.

<sup>91</sup> Andrews, *The Community Industries*, 170.

<sup>92</sup> Neal, *The Journal*, 141.

<sup>93</sup> During the Civil War, the Kentucky Shaker women used various ruses to defend their textile stores from the greedy—not the needy—soldiers marauding in the area (Neal, *The Journal*, 26-27).

<sup>94</sup> Blinn, [*Canterbury*] *Church Record*; White & Taylor, *Shakerism*, 316.

maintain such accounts as these. Later as a “tailoress,”<sup>95</sup> Adams maintained a notebook titled “Graduated Scale of Waist Measures” and was responsible for the purchase (or production) of cloth (and its color or wrinkle-resistance), its construction into clothing, and its maintenance. Shaker scholar John T. Kirk explains tailoring as a typical job for the ministry since it could be suspended for other jobs as necessary.<sup>96</sup> Shakers produced a range of fabrics: “changeable” red/blue cotton, flannel, linen and cotton sheeting, fine woolens, and coverlets.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, they mixed the dyes and applied the waterproof and wrinkle-free finishes (originated in the Maine communities in 1824<sup>98</sup>) that made Shaker fabrics popular for sale. Finally, the Shaker tailors and tailoresses constructed garments from the fabric they had woven. After 1848, the looms operated by water power till the weaving room was officially closed in 1869 and dismantled in 1905.<sup>99</sup> By this time, cloth produced by New England mill girls—such as Adams’s contemporaries, Lucy Larcom and Harriet Hanson Robinson (discussed further in chapter six, this volume)—and male and female immigrants in commercial mills rendered Shaker production unprofitable.<sup>100</sup> Textiles retained, however, their association with women’s labor and contributed materially and metaphorically to Shaker domesticity.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Whitcher, *A Brief History*, 181.

<sup>96</sup> Kirk, *The Shaker World*, 141.

<sup>97</sup> Blinn, *[Canterbury] Church Record*, n.p.

<sup>98</sup> Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 27.

<sup>99</sup> Blinn, *[Canterbury] Church Record*, n.p.; Evans, *Diary*, n.p.

<sup>100</sup> Andrews, *Community Industries*, 179, 184, 187.

<sup>101</sup> Rozsika Parker in *The Subversive Stitch* (1984) traces the associations of handicrafts such as textile work with the feminine, a history she traces to the evolution of the middle class. She distinguishes utilitarian (i.e., sewing) from ornamental (i.e., embroidery) needlework and argues, “The merchant class wanted wives who combined the appearance of nobility with the activities of the labouring class. [...] Sewing may have suggested a pleasing modesty, but embroidery conferred noble distinction” (63).

Indeed, the Shaker women's communal industry—shared labor—enabled domestic stability that non-Shaker women could not guarantee. The shared, rotating labor even allowed Adams time to heed and produce gift images and prophecies, thus perpetuating female authority in the church. Also, Shaker women observed how their system of specialized and rotating labor assignments (through cooking, weaving, or laundering, for example) allegedly prevented the ceaseless drudgery such as experienced by housewives. The Shaker communal system eliminated replication of labor and encouraged cooperative relationships.<sup>102</sup> Historian Dolores Hayden explains, "From a feminist viewpoint, the major achievement of most communitarian experiments was ending the isolation of the housewife. Domestic work became social labor. Shaker women sang humorous songs about cooking and cleaning while they worked."<sup>103</sup> Together Shaker women contributed to the physical well-being of the spiritual community, and each woman's work was unique, valuable, and non-alienated.

In fact, their work enabled them financially to maintain a permanent home within the community family. Thus, a Shaker village provided the "restorative haven" Cott identifies as an element of domesticity.<sup>104</sup> A non-Shaker female writer for an 1877 periodical noted the efficiency and the permanence of Shaker arrangements:

There is something about this air of permanence which takes hold upon you for the time being. You, yourself, are not sure of anything;

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<sup>102</sup> Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, 37.

<sup>103</sup> Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, 39.

<sup>104</sup> The eventual closing of all but one Shaker village, of course, may seem to provide an ironic footnote to the praise for the security of the Society. It must not be forgotten, however, that Canterbury Shaker Village, for instance, provided a secure home for the last remaining Shaker sisters (after the 1965 closing of the covenant) until their deaths.

you may be obliged to change your place of abode to-morrow, or next week, or at farthest *sometime*; you are not certain even that you can keep your own homestead in your family. Everybody is liable to 'sell out,' to fail in business; changes uncounted on may take place, contingencies may arise, necessitating a removal, even to those whose local attachments would seem to be strong enough to hold them to one spot all their lives.<sup>105</sup>

Historian Suzanne Thurman explains that the Shaker villages eventually became "shelter[s] to abused wives and desperate widows," thus "challenging the 'traditional' and patriarchal American family."<sup>106</sup> Hentz, in her 1839 short story, concedes to the Society "their incorruptible honesty, their unwearied industry, their trusting hospitality, their kindness and charity."<sup>107</sup>

But many non-Shakers—fiction writers in particular—believed that Shaker stability exacted a terrible price, a type of Shaker enslavement. One short story by a non-Shaker male author depicts Shaker women as crushed by the order and monotony of their cheese-paring existence, women who find solace in mind-numbing dullness after early tragedies drive them to convert to Shakerism.<sup>108</sup> Fiction writers ubiquitously depicted disillusioned female Shakers dashing furtively from their dwelling houses to meet their non-Shaker male lovers and rescuers. With all the males lurking in fiction's woods, waiting to rendezvous with lovely Shaker apostates, it's a wonder they didn't form a convoy.

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<sup>105</sup> Harris, "Among the Shakers," 21.

<sup>106</sup> Thurman, "O Sisters," 3.

<sup>107</sup> Hentz, "The Shaker Girl," page 3 of 14.

<sup>108</sup> Haight, "A Shaker Romance," 626, 625.

Perhaps the Shakers' mid-nineteenth century success at creating an alternate domesticity spurred authors to portray Shaker arrangements as scabrous. Critic R. Michael Pugh's study of Shakers in literature explains that nineteenth-century fiction by worldly authors worked to "contain" the Shaker threat to the marriage narrative. Pugh explains, "This process of containment requires these authors to make Shakerism 'other' in a domestic sense—to make Shaker Family arrangements into non-families rather than alternative or counter-families, and to dispose of Shaker homes by emptying them out and even burning them down."<sup>109</sup> Certainly, nineteenth-century non-Shaker authors worked to "unconvert" Shaker women who were unlikely to see their pleas anyway. The motive, then, was likely to preserve notions of middle-class womanhood whose values were apparently threatened by women who did not marry, "keep house," or bear children. Shaker women, the authors argued, had talents that might be better appreciated by a husband and children. A nineteenth-century poem in *The Knickerbocker* addresses Shaker women, lamenting the "early blight" to Shaker women's happiness as they pine for worldly pleasures. The poet tells them sadly,

Ye would have graced right well  
 The bridal scene, the banquet, or the bowers  
 Where mirth and revelry usurp the hours [...]  
 And woman's tread is o'er a path of flowers.<sup>110</sup>

An anonymous Shaker poet-respondent (actually Harvey Eads<sup>111</sup>) hastens to assure Cushman that Shaker women are doing fine, thank you, and are in no danger of

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<sup>109</sup> Pugh, *A Thorn in the Text*, 51.

<sup>110</sup> Cushman, "Lines by Charlotte Cushman."

expiring from lost love.<sup>112</sup> The "Answer," replies sharply, "But 'tis not we who live the dronish lives, / But those who have their husbands, or their wives!" The Shaker poet writes of "industry, and wealth, combined" where "we labor for each other's good."<sup>113</sup>

Catharine Sedgwick, in her 1824 novel *Redwood*, also iterated stereotypes of the Shakers. One Sedgwick character, a Yankee battle-axe, reviles the Shakers as "idolators" (for their veneration of Mother Ann Lee and their practice of celibacy) even as she grudgingly admits that their housekeeping and child-rearing practices are exemplary. Ms. Lenox proclaims, "I do think if they [the Shakers] could be prevailed on to turn their settlement into a school to bring up young folks for the married state, they would be a blessing to the world, instead of a spectacle to show how much wisdom and how much folly may be mixed up together."<sup>114</sup>

In fact, Shaker work was arranged on a rotating basis so that no sister was burdened too long with any onerous tasks (unless they preferred not to rotate), and they avoided monotony with special worship services, union meetings with male believers, and even vacations to Rye Beach, for example. Shared labor in the communal environment was social, even joyous labor.

### **Mothering (and Defending) a Shaker Family**

Together, Shaker women forged relationships that supplied a surrogate, affectional family unlike the nuclear family espoused by the discourse of domesticity.

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<sup>111</sup> Bolton, *Some Lines in Verse about the Shakers*.

<sup>112</sup> Eads, "Answer."

<sup>113</sup> Eads, "Answer." Eads's assertions are supported by the writings and photographs of Shakers themselves. My favorite turn-of-the-century photograph depicts Canterbury Shaker girls apple-picking; the girls also composed a fun follow-up poem modeled after Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade."

<sup>114</sup> Sedgwick, *Redwood*, II:283.

Since Shaker women could not become biological mothers after they followed the tenet of celibacy, they could not achieve true womanhood or its attendant domesticity, nineteenth-century critics argued. A female non-Shaker writer accused the Shakers of violating “[t]he sacredness of the family,” a “great evil,” by separating husband and wives or parents and children, for example.<sup>115</sup> But Aurelia Mace, Adams’s sister at the Sabbathday Lake, Maine community, explains,

The life that Jesus lived is our example, and our order is founded upon the principles of that church that was organized at Jerusalem by his disciples. *We have given up the private family life*, and found in its place the great brotherhood and sisterhood which Jesus promised to those who would become his followers. All are loved and cared for. The rich and exalted come down and the poor are raised up, bringing all upon a Christian level.<sup>116</sup>

Not only did Shaker women raise children (the children placed there by converts or as wards), they also established non-biological relationships of motherhood and sisterhood.<sup>117</sup> Despite propaganda to the contrary, Shakers valued their surrogate parenthood and domesticity. Repeated literary references support the concept of a Shaker family. Paulina Bates, an early Shaker author, writes in *The Divine Book of Holy and Eternal Wisdom, Revealing The Word of God; Out of*

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<sup>115</sup> Peabody qtd. in Morse, *The Shakers*, 94.

<sup>116</sup> Mace, *The Aletheia*, 20, emphasis added.

<sup>117</sup> Priscilla J. Brewer explains, “Housed separately from adults after the late 1820s, girls usually lived in a ‘Girls’ Shop’ in one Family, and boys resided in a ‘Boys’ Shop’ at another. A common schoolhouse was used by the girls for four months in the summer, and by the boys for an equivalent time in the winter. When out of school, children were integrated into the working life of the community, sometimes given large tasks as a group, and sometimes assigned in twos or threes to specific workshops. In the latter case, an older member often took the children under his or her wing and became a surrogate parent” (*Shaker Communities*, 75).

*Whose Mouth Goeth a Sharp Sword* (1849), "Wisdom will teach you a far better way to act the part of a mother, and a bosom friend to your companion."<sup>118</sup> Around 1790, Shaker Joseph Meacham had outlined four steps to "gathering into order" and forming Shaker communities. He recommended, "separation from the world," "economic commitment to the community," "agreement to the covenant," and "establishment of Shaker 'Families' to replace natural families left behind or dissolved upon entry into the Shaker community."<sup>119</sup> These Shaker "Families" were economic as well as affectional entities. During the New Hampshire legislative investigation into Shaker practices (which I discuss later), Adams's compatriot Sister Myra Bean, the girls' caretaker (until June 1844<sup>120</sup>), reported, "I took care of children as a mother, in the place of natural parents, and treated them properly, to the best of my wisdom."<sup>121</sup> And Canterbury Shaker sister Lucy Ann Shepard wrote a poem to Eldress Rebecca Adams, Hester Ann's sister:

Such a Mother I have tis in thee I do find  
 Beloved Eldress Sister so true  
 That Motherly spirit & true gentle love  
 Which binds me most snugly to you  
 You are one that I love you are dearer to me  
 Than all natural kin or connection  
 Nay no Brother or Sister in nature can share

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<sup>118</sup> Bates, *The Divine Book*, 517.

<sup>119</sup> Procter-Smith, *Women in Shaker Community*, 40-41.

<sup>120</sup> Whitcher, *A Brief History*, 189.

<sup>121</sup> *Shaker Examination*, 55.



With you in this heart felt affection.<sup>122</sup>

Shaker sisters were thus unlimited in their affectional and spiritual connections; they could seek their own “mothers” to act as exemplars in temporal and spiritual labor. Shaker domesticity was not without its own mothers and children.

Shaker domesticity—as well as Shakers’ ability to recruit new members—were under frequent attack. Horace Scudder, editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* and non-Shaker author of an 1880 short story “A House of Entertainment,” describes the painful eradication of the bonds of the nuclear family in the Shaker community. Ruth Hanway, a young Shaker and biological daughter of Elder Isaiah, never refers to him as her father; in fact, Scudder writes,

She had been taught to ignore the relationship; yet if any had watched narrowly they would have seen that neither did she call him Elder Isaiah. [...] But in secret she cherished the name [“father”], and once, in the fields, when she was out of hearing, she had uttered it aloud. She clung to it instinctively, and as instinctively held it for her own secret. He never used the word ‘daughter’ to her, but in the silent place where she kept his name she kept also the tones with which he spoke to her when he unconsciously used a father’s voice.<sup>123</sup>

In the conclusion of the story, however, as Elder Isaiah Hanway lies dying, he calls for his own daughter, “my Ruth,” he says, and Ruth finally has the privilege of a biological daughter.<sup>124</sup> But Scudder’s portrayal of the inexorable eradication of all natural affections seems belied by the proliferating familial associations established

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<sup>122</sup> Shepard, *Poems*.

<sup>123</sup> Scudder, “A House of Entertainment,” 93-94.

<sup>124</sup> Scudder, “A House of Entertainment,” 113.

within the Society. Women acquired numerous brothers, and they were assigned to particular male Believers in order to tend to his housekeeping and wardrobe. They fostered sisterly, daughterly, and motherly relations within the community.

In fact, Adams's "motherhood" to the Canterbury community brought her to the fore in an 1848 scandal that she had perhaps anticipated at the time of the gift image. In the quartered circle section of Adams's image, deceased Shaker founders William Lee and James Whittaker make a dire prediction about the tribulations to be endured by Believers. They tell Adams, "The time cometh and is near when the imperfections of zion shall be carried into Babylon to be proclaimed aloud in their streets; and not only this but your most precious pearls your rich and sacred treasures will be at their will to dispose of them as their carnal appetites crave." Here, the warning shows great prescience for the very public scandal which unfolded in 1848 and in which Hester Ann Adams received notoriety. After the accidental death of a young boy in 1840, vocal apostate and anti-Shaker virago Mary Marshall Dyer petitioned yet another inquiry into Shaker practices.<sup>125</sup> The petition earned a weeks-long hearing before the New Hampshire legislature during which Shaker apostates testified against Shakers' treatment of children and adult members. Eldress Hester Ann Adams and several of her peers were publicly castigated for their overzealous behavior. The apostate James M. Otis, a former Canterbury elder, testified that Adams had accused a sister of sexual corruption. Adams and some other women then "hailed down" the young woman who was trod upon and later shut up overnight. Otis concluded his testimony, "I did not suppose

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<sup>125</sup> De Wolfe, *Shaking the Faith*, 148.

their intention was to injure her much.”<sup>126</sup> Ultimately, the Shakers were exonerated in charges of abuse or failure to remunerate apostate members, and the legislature scrapped a harsh anti-Shaker bill.<sup>127</sup> But the legislative testimony was printed and distributed by a Concord printing house, and it exposed Shaker domestic practices to general critique. Adams’s various texts may have affirmed her spiritual goals during times of earthly tribulation.

Adams saw herself as a mother to her fellow Believers. In the outer square in the upper left of the gift image, the spirit of Mother Ann Lee urges Adams, “be thou unto all such as I have been unto thee, A Mother full of instructive lessons.” Adams’s gift image is itself a lesson in how to remain faithful during times of trial and in how to labor over a gift by producing it so reverently on paper. Shaker women modeled their relationships after Mother Ann Lee whom they believed to represent the mother aspect of the dual Godhead. Shaker (and, by 1844, apostate<sup>128</sup>) Lydia M. Chase reasoned in an 1843 text,

What rational soul can dispute the wisdom and propriety of a spiritual Mother in the new creation, any more than a spiritual Father? In the natural order and creation of the human race, the male and the female are both workers together; and the natural creation of all things is a

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<sup>126</sup> *Shaker Examination*, 26. Otis apostasized with two others around August 21, 1845. Blinn, *[Canterbury] Church Record*, 192.

<sup>127</sup> De Wolfe, *Shaking the Faith*, 150.

<sup>128</sup> Whitcher, *A Brief History*, 188. Even at the height of Shaker strength of population, Shakers endured small flurries of apostasy. For instance, in February 1844, five members apostasized from the Canterbury community; in May, two more departed; in June, two more (Blinn, *[Canterbury] Church Record*, 187).

figure of the spiritual; therefore no soul is born of God that does not acknowledge a spiritual Mother, as well as a spiritual Father.<sup>129</sup>

Shakers referred to the female aspect of God as Holy Mother Wisdom, a mothering presence echoed on earth in Mother Ann Lee and other celibate Shaker sisters.<sup>130</sup> Any follower of Mother Ann might experience Holy Mother Wisdom and serve as a spiritual guide for others.

Shaker Paulina Bates's special instructions for Shaker women and "mothers" resemble in great measure other nineteenth-century domestic handbooks that promoted domestic environmentalism and the "self-abnegating wife and mother." She writes,

Refrain thy feet from wandering abroad for amusement and pleasure; but rather find amusement within your own dwellings, in the nurture and tuition of thy little ones, and in discharging all the necessary duties which remain incumbent upon thee. And remember withal to keep a clean habitation, and let order, regularity and cleanliness govern thy premises, even from the house top to the cellar, that the blessing of peace may attend you, and the holy Angels, which pass and repass, may have respect to your habitations.<sup>131</sup>

The attention to house and children produced a community of cared-for and caring Believers. Bates, along with other Shakers, believed that order in the material world could produce order in the spiritual world. Shakers' formation of communities with a

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<sup>129</sup> Chase qtd. in Stewart, *A Holy, Sacred and Divine Roll and Book*, 260.

<sup>130</sup> Sally Kitch writes, "Through her identification with Mother Ann, the celibate female became a Spiritual Mother, embodying the 'maternal principle' found in the female qualities of God (Holy Mother Wisdom) and the Christ Spirit (Mother Ann herself)" ("As a Sign," 5).

<sup>131</sup> Bates, *The Divine Book*, 517-518.

communal raising of children and a sharing of duties offered a “communitarian” or even “utopian” alternative to the isolated houses and situations of nuclear families in conventional practices of domesticity. The fact that the Shakers could successfully operate an alternative to the nuclear family model showed that domestic space “was a social product” and that communitarian alternatives were just as valid for providing child care and for meeting daily living needs.<sup>132</sup> Bates praised this model and assured that those who attended to domestic concerns would merit the respect of angels. Adams’s 1845 gift image, with its emphasis on houses and garments, marks the house and its domestic concerns at the heart of a healthy faith.

Shaker women fostered their own spiritual growth and proselytized, particularly among the Millerites and Spiritualists. Shaker women, such as Canterbury Shaker Betsey Kaime (a contemporary of Hester Ann Adams), worked assiduously to convert Millerites (also known as Adventists) to the Shaker faith. One of her poems invites an Adventist to join the United Society:

And now friend Abiah I freely invite you,

A whole hearted Shaker to be:

You will not regret it I feel save in saying

Altho’ you should follow Anna Lee.<sup>133</sup>

Through her poetry, Betsey counseled like a good mother, urging her addressees to seek God and to eschew worldly ties. Shakers called this love among sisters and brethren a “gospel affection,” a union that Shaker scholar Rosemary D. Gooden

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<sup>132</sup> Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, 50.

<sup>133</sup> Kaime, “A farewell for Abiah Peavey.”

explains was “institutionalized in writing and sometimes in the exchange of gifts or ‘tokens of love and union.’”<sup>134</sup>

### **Weaving Textile Work and Shaker Domesticity**

Shaker sisters exchanged carefully-trimmed and textile-inspired paper tokens as proof of their gospel affection within the Shaker family, affection resulting from shared spiritual and physical labor. This gospel affection seemed particularly strong among sisters:

Among sisters there existed a ‘female world of love and ritual’ that excluded brethren. Although this was a result in part of the structure of Shaker society and its tenets, especially separation of the sexes and celibacy, this female world of love and ritual among sisters was also a continuation and expansion of the social experiences of women who joined the Society of Believers; such relationships were the norm in American culture in the nineteenth century.<sup>135</sup>

Shaker scholar Sally Kitch explains, “the shared compositions and images suggest the artists’ intention to convey a specifically female message by using the visual language of needlework, the patterns, motifs, and compositions of which formed an identifiable female lexicon.”<sup>136</sup>

Shaker women would have recognized the quilt- or token-like composition of Adams’s gift image. Moreover, in the second horizontal bar from the top of the image, where the writing is oriented toward the right, Adams records in golden ink a

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<sup>134</sup> Gooden, “‘In the Bonds,’” 104.

<sup>135</sup> Gooden, “‘In the Bonds,’” 106.

<sup>136</sup> Kitch, “‘As a Sign,’” 13.

gift of embroidery from a Shaker spirit, an appeal to the token tradition. In the image, the deceased Shaker spirit of Garret K. Lawrence of New Lebanon, New York bestows his blessing and a “piece of embroidery” for Adams to wear around her neck. He himself had published a testimony in 1816, and his rather “feminine” gift indicates the permeability of Shaker gender constructions. Such a token—even in its abstract rather than concrete form—would serve as an encouragement to faithfulness and a reminder of the proximity of the spiritual world. Indeed, textiles served as tokens of gift exchange, as with the giving of handkerchiefs and neckerchiefs, and for markers of feminine accomplishment as with needlework samplers. Young women often stitched their initials into their first pieces of weaving or needlework as testimony of their achievement. And the investment of these pieces with emotional significance made them worthy of saving. A Sabbathday Lake gift song with a swatch of checked fabric pinned to it and the 1843 sacred sheet drawing backed with white cloth demonstrate the link of spiritual and textile.<sup>137</sup>

In particular, swatches of Mother Ann’s apron turn up in several Shaker museums. Although the swatches all share a blue and white check in linen or linen/woollen blend, they are not all derived from the same source. The apron is a significant piece of the Shaker wardrobe because it is a product of female labor enabling a woman to continue her work without damage to the earlier labor investment of the whole dress underneath. Moreover, Mother Ann’s apron, according to legend, carried solace. One Shaker woman, Jemima Blanchard, told the story of how she collapsed in fear and grief of her sin. Blanchard grabbed onto Mother Ann’s apron when the Shaker founder stooped to comfort her, and she

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<sup>137</sup> See Morin, *Heavenly Visions*, catalog 12.

clenched the apron and drew comfort from it. Mother Ann later gave the apron to her.<sup>138</sup> This story recalls stories of the power of Jesus's garment hem, as in Matthew 9:20 and 14:36, and invests the apron with special properties which were then divided among the purported apron swatches. The Canterbury swatch of Mother Ann's apron, for example, is cross-stitched, "A / Remnant / Of / an apron / once worn / by / Mother Ann Lee / by — 1851" and crosswise, "Manufactured / in / England 1774." Indeed, by the 1860s, Shaker elders were inquiring about "the propriety of installing purchased carpeting, *willing personal possessions to other members*, and the wearing of jewelry."<sup>139</sup> These inquiries indicate a shift in Shaker practice towards more Victorian notions of private property ownership and accumulation (possibly in a bid to draw and retain new members). But the act of "willing" property also follows the tradition of token exchange practiced by Shakers and non-Shakers alike to strengthen affectional bonds.

Mother Ann's apron and the spiritual gift of embroidery Adams receives from Shaker Brother Lawrence make sacred women's work with textiles and weave together a community of Believers. Historian Suzanne Thurman explains that this sacralization of labor made all work, whether skilled or unskilled, valuable.<sup>140</sup> She writes, "Given the sisters' contributions to the economy, one would expect the women to take pride in their accomplishments, and records indicate that they did."<sup>141</sup> And although the Shakers drew largely from the working classes, class was

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<sup>138</sup> Grosvenor qtd. in Humez, *Mother's First-Born Daughters*, 58.

<sup>139</sup> Brewer, *Shaker Communities*, 167; emphasis added.

<sup>140</sup> Thurman, "O Sisters," 71.

<sup>141</sup> Thurman, "O Sisters," 75.



effectively erased within the community by shared labor, uniform garments, and communal property, all elements of Shaker domesticity.

Indeed, Shaker founder Ann Lee's own history with textiles endows them as symbols of domestic freedom, financial or spiritual. Ann Lee, born in 1736, was the daughter of a blacksmith and a tailor.<sup>142</sup> She began work as a Manchester factory girl at age eight.<sup>143</sup> Nardi Reeder Campion's biography of Lee explains, "Young Ann's first job was as a cutter of velvet. Later she prepared cotton for the looms and sheared fur for the hat makers. She worked twelve hours a day, on her feet the entire time because no seats were provided for children. On Sundays, like the other children, she helped clean the equipment, hoping not to be injured by the dangerous machinery."<sup>144</sup> One historian suggests that Lee's early work in the textile mills introduced her to the labor/capital divide which aroused in her and her fellow believers "a primitive social consciousness—a concern for the disillusioned, among whom they recruited their members."<sup>145</sup> When she came to the United States and began to proselytize around New York and New England, she frequently encountered threats to her person. On one occasion, however, she sought refuge in textile production: "a friendly neighbor saved her from harm by hiding her beneath a pile of wool in an attic."<sup>146</sup>

Mother Ann's work with textiles endowed the labor with significance, especially after her death when she became identified as Christ's counterpart, the female messiah. To labor in Mother Ann's footsteps—to cast the shuttle or trim the

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<sup>142</sup> Campion, *Mother Ann Lee*, 1.

<sup>143</sup> Hine, "Communitarianism," 28; Campion, *Mother Ann Lee*, 2.

<sup>144</sup> Campion, *Mother Ann Lee*, 3.

<sup>145</sup> Berry, *America's Utopian Experiments*, 28.

<sup>146</sup> Campion, *Mother Ann Lee*, 30.

threads—was to labor toward spiritual gifts. Women's labor with textiles was a sacralized labor, a labor of physical necessity and symbolic significance.

Throughout the Bible, for instance, garments made of textiles serve as the signal of new life in God, new devotion or commitment. Clean garments signify purity in spirit as well as honor God. David washes and changes his apparel, for instance, before he worships.<sup>147</sup> In Genesis, Jacob urges his household, "Put away the strange gods that [are] among you, and be clean, and change your garments."<sup>148</sup> In Revelation white robes signify a spiritual purity achieved through Christ's sacrifice for man; the robes are "made white in the blood of the Lamb."<sup>149</sup>

Canterbury Shaker poet Betsey Kaime repeatedly notes metaphoric garments that Believers earn through their spiritual and physical labor. She assures an addressee that the Shaker way will earn her "A garment white"<sup>150</sup> and that another will "have a garment free from wrinkles, & from flaws."<sup>151</sup> The male Shaker founders who speak in Adams's 1845 gift image also emphasize the importance of garments and their cleanliness, textile duties assumed by women. Father James Whittaker prays that Adams will "cleanse her habitation, change her apparel, and make ready for the visitation of the Lord."<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> 2 Samuel 12:20: "Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed [himself], and changed his apparel, and came into the house of the Lord, and worshipped: then he came to his own house, and when he required, they set bread before him, and he did eat."

<sup>148</sup> Genesis 35:2: "Then Jacob said unto his household, and to all that [were] with him; Put away the strange gods that [are] among you, and be clean, and change your garments."

<sup>149</sup> Revelations 7:13-14; Sprigg, *By Shaker Hands*, 182.

<sup>150</sup> Kaime, "Lines for Elizabeth Bradley."

<sup>151</sup> Kaime, "Eli Kidder Acrostic."

<sup>152</sup> Whittaker's advice derives from two possible sources: 2 Samuel 12:20: "Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed [himself], and changed his apparel, and came into the house of the Lord, and worshipped: then he came to his own house, and when he required, they set bread before him, and he did eat." Genesis 35:2: "Then Jacob said unto his household, and to all that [were] with him; Put away the strange gods that [are] among you, and be clean, and change your garments."

The prevalence of this clothing metaphor places faith directly in the hands of garment makers; clothing is a facet of religious well-being. Together, Fathers William Lee and James Whittaker speak in unison from the heart-shaped section of the gift image where they advise, "And now as the heart of one man do we say unto you, be clad with the strength and power of your God and stand for Him with us thro time." Their words seem to echo Isaiah's portayal of God's intervention on Israel's behalf: "For he put on righteousness as a breastplate, and an helmet of salvation upon his head; and he put on the garments of vengeance [for] clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloke." Even beyond their biblical or metaphorical uses, garments of Shaker-made textiles created "gospel union" in the Shaker communities. Believers demonstrated their "affection and love for other Believers, and loyalty to the Shaker way" by wearing garments of uniform appearance.<sup>153</sup> The institutional uniformity of dress also removed worldly concerns of style.<sup>154</sup> The Shaker dress reflects a loyalty of faith and lifestyle, a mutual devotion and a mode of production that frees sisters from worldly worries in order to turn their energy to spiritual matters. In fact, female Shaker apostates were divested of their caps and kerchiefs.<sup>155</sup>

### Conclusion

One could rely entirely on history and statistics of Shaker social structures, labor, and worship to reach an understanding of Shaker women's domesticity, but in doing so one would miss the theoretical underpinnings to Shaker domesticity, a revised ideology of womanhood. Shaker literature, including women's writings, not

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<sup>153</sup> Gooden, "In the Bonds," 104.

<sup>154</sup> Gordon, *Shaker Textile Arts*, 148-149.

<sup>155</sup> See also Thurman, "O Sisters," 76-77.

only reveals the historical practices of domesticity but also reveals women's attitudes and manipulations of these practices.<sup>156</sup> Shaker writers produced songs, testimonies, prophecies, and poems—sometimes in concert with spirit-inspired illustrations—that were generally composed for private exchange. Shaker women's literature also serves to balance, perhaps, the fiction and non-fiction writings produced by critics of Shaker domesticity, including the work of such famous authors as Catharine Sedgwick, Caroline Lee Hentz, Charles Dickens, William Dean Howells, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Hester Ann Adams and her Shaker sisters, however, used this domestic knowledge to revise notions of domesticity: to establish labor-saving communal homes; to gain self-support through textile and domestic labor; and to establish non-biological, non-nuclear spiritual families. When Adams received and copied a spirit message urging her Shaker family to "cleanse her habitation, change her apparel, and make ready for the visitation of the Lord," she endowed women's work with biblical significance. Not only did such work represent physical and spiritual labor to

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<sup>156</sup> Shaker eldresses Anna White and Leila Taylor, writing in 1905, respond to accusations that Shakers have eschewed literary achievements:

During the first seventy-five years of their communal existence, Shakers were too busy with temporal conditions and spiritual needs to engage in literary or artistic enterprises, and for the last fifty years, their slowly decreasing numbers, the increasing burden of taxation, the industrial changes forced upon them, together with the sense of obligation to preserve intact the united inheritance, have operated to increase the demand for devotion of time and strength to manual labor, beyond what would otherwise be necessary for support of the families.

For such reasons, as well as from the religious sense of separation from the world and worldly interests, Shaker literary genius has not revealed itself in the world's markets. Shakers have sometimes been regarded as averse to literary and artistic efforts. This estimate is hardly a correct one. In seeking the highest possible spiritual development, Shakers have left behind much in art and literature commonly regarded as of value, yet, in this very renunciation, in attaining purity of life and thought, they have developed a pure, refined, spiritual taste, eminently fitting them for the appreciation of the highest in art and literature. (*Shakerism*, 319)

White and Taylor may overlook literary contributions in the forms of songs, testimonies, prophecies, and poems produced by Shaker authors.

attain grace, it enabled women to maintain a celibate, cooperative, communal domesticity that afforded financial independence. Although Shaker women rarely wrote for publication, they nevertheless left a legacy of literature. These pieces, now maintained in manuscript collections or published for the first time in the twentieth century, reveal how Shaker women's work with fabrics inspired an alternate model of domesticity.

When Eldress Hester Ann Adams died in 1888, one Shaker sister recalled, "There never was a darker night than the night that Eldress Hester died."<sup>157</sup> That the night should have been dark—without light or color—seems a suitable heavenly tribute to a woman who brought colorful paints and textiles and spiritual light into her Shaker community. For forty-five years as eldress in Canterbury and Sabbathday Lake, Maine, she led a labor of faith. In an analysis of Adams's extant gift image, one may read the life and work of a Shaker sister and the ways in which textile work helped to define Shaker domesticity.

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<sup>157</sup> Mace, *Aurelia Mace Journal*, 6 August 1896.

## CHAPTER 3

### TEXTILE OPPRESSION AND LIBERATION IN HARRIET WILSON'S *OUR NIG*

#### Introduction

Approximately fifty miles away by road from Adams's Canterbury home is Milford, New Hampshire.<sup>1</sup> This town has, in the past twenty years or so, received attention as the site of Harriet Wilson's struggle for domestic freedom. Harriet Wilson (1825-1900), a "free" black indentured servant in Milford, later wrote her 1859 novel, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, as a sort of exposé of both New Hampshire's virulent racism and its rueful, ineffectual head-shaking at the practice.<sup>2</sup> Hester Ann Adams and Harriet E. Adams Wilson (no apparent relation)—perhaps only eight years apart in age and scant miles apart in geography—led very different domestic lives and experienced textiles in very different ways because of their race and class affiliations. As Adams's Shaker community entered its last years of small-scale textile production for home use, Wilson participated in wool production for the New Hampshire and Massachusetts commercial mills nearby. In both cases, however, textiles remain the markers and means of reconfiguring women's roles and homes.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson's hometown of Milford did not receive rail service until 1850 when the line from Nashua was completed. See Wright, *The Granite Town*, 293.

<sup>2</sup> Melish, in *Disowning Slavery*, uses the term "exposé" in reference to Wilson's novel (284).

In this chapter, I argue that textiles and the textile industry are complicit in the enactment of race oppression by bolstering white, middle-class domesticity. No one who has read Wilson's descriptions of Frado's inadequate winter garb or bare attic room or who has read industry reports about the production of "negro cloth" can wonder at textiles' agency in inscribing race. Racism is not a monolithic, *de facto* societal force; rather, drawing on theorist Bruno Latour, society—and its race practice—is a series of associated speech acts, actions, and things. He explains that there is no *per se* "Society" which is "the hidden source of causality which could be mobilized so as to account for the existence and stability of some other action or behavior," such as racism. Instead, society is composed of "many other little things that are not social by nature, but only social in the sense that they are *associated* with one another."<sup>3</sup> Racism, like its alleged progenitor "Society," is no static force but a series of discursive reinscriptions, such as through textile use or what I call "textile oppression." As Wilson demonstrates in her novel, those with the power to purchase or produce textiles have the power to distribute or withhold them as well. Textiles are a means of delineating difference.

Wilson's novel provides an opportunity to analyze the fetishization of textiles; it provides a valuable counterpoint to Susan Warner's use of textiles as refining and elevating. Ellen Montgomery in *The Wide, Wide World* enjoys the refining and elevating effects of textiles enmeshed in emotional associations; Wilson's narrator in *Our Nig*, however, describes Frado's implication in the labor of textile production as well as her unpleasant discovery of textiles' disciplinary agency as deployed by Mrs. Bellmont. Is textile discipline thus coarsening and depleting? Not necessarily.

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<sup>3</sup> Latour, "When Things Strike Back," 113.

Frado remains to some degree trapped by her inadequate garments. Her thin clothing and lack of shoes and socks limit the radius of her movement, and they also mark her as a racialized dependent of the Bellmonts. Nevertheless, Frado refuses to internalize these textile markers. Material culture theorist Daniel Miller, in discussing the conflicts and negotiations of things and spaces in the home, argues, “we cannot equate the private with the personal. There are many conflicts between the agency expressed by individuals, by the family, the household, and not least as we shall see the house itself, that make the private more a turbulent sea of constant negotiation rather than simply some haven for the self.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, while Mrs. Bellmont gives Frado “private” garments with racialized, ungendered properties, Frado herself contests these inscriptions and does not make them personal. Frado refuses to become a “haven” for Mrs. Bellmont’s self, the incarnation of Mrs. Bellmont’s “Other.” Miller suggests that these textile objects are as much about objectifying Mrs. Bellmont as Frado: he argues, “[T]hrough dwelling upon the more mundane sensual and material qualities of the object, we are able to unpick the more subtle connections with cultural lives and values that are objectified through these forms, in part, because of the particular qualities they possess.”<sup>5</sup> We may, then, understand the “rags”—worn-out clothing scraps infused with the experiences and associations of their former wearers—with which Mrs. Bellmont clothes Frado as revealing Mrs. Bellmont’s fears and character.

I also argue in this chapter that if textiles can be implicated in race oppression, they can perhaps be used to liberate. Late in the novel, after Frado’s

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<sup>4</sup> Miller, “Behind Closed Doors,” 4.

<sup>5</sup> Miller, “Why Some Things Matter,” 9.



release from indenture, she not only earns money by sewing, she also constructs new, healthful garments for herself. I argue, then, that new clothing serves for Frado as a transitional object in her move from object to subject. Transitional objects are usually cast as security blankets and teddy bears which ease a child's separation from the mother, and I do not mean to infantilize Frado's development. Indeed, I believe that Frado's design and construction of textile garments—unalienated labor—ease her into the market economy and enable subjectivity.<sup>6</sup> Material culture theorist Judy Attfield describes the transitional object as the product of "a process of cathexis which transforms it into a personal possession. Cathexis is a form of emotional investment transferred into an object to form a link between a person and the outside world, so that a simple object like a mug or a sweater becomes a mediator and is experienced as a reinforcement to the sense of self."<sup>7</sup> These new textile objects efface previous textile uses and associations and precipitate Wilson's entrance into the market economy through both consumption and production of textile goods. Through textile endeavors, she enacts an autonomous self.

As one might guess from the above citations, my work employs the work of material culture theorists, clothing and fashion critics, wool industry historians, race theorists, and of course literary critics to contextualize the significance of Wilson's textile references. I rely here on Frances Smith Foster's call to become "literary anthropologists, looking underneath the stated ideas and events to see what is not

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<sup>6</sup> See Ernest, *Resistance and Reformation*.

<sup>7</sup> Attfield, *Wild Things*, 130.

shown.”<sup>8</sup> I believe that Wilson’s narrative of domestic textile oppression and subsequent liberation and uplift also critiques the textile economy around Milford.

### **Wilson in Critical Context**

Recent scholarship on Harriet Wilson and *Our Nig* has illuminated her life; the significance of the novel’s rhetorical strategies; and the New England historical, social, and racial context that contributed to both. The successive, ground-breaking work by Henry Louis Gates, Barbara White, R.J. Ellis, Eric Gardner, and P. Gabrielle Foreman and Reginald Pitts has brought Wilson’s life and achievements into the light of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Harriet E. Adams was born in 1825<sup>9</sup> to Joshua Green and Margaret Adams. In the case of her origins, she parallels the life of her protagonist Frado, who is also the daughter of a white mother and a black father. Also similar to Frado, Adams appears to have been deposited at around age six with a white family for whom she probably served an indenture. White’s careful research identifies the family as the Haywards, of Milford, New Hampshire, including Nehemiah, Junior and Rebecca Hutchinson Hayward—in the novel, the infamous Mrs. Bellmont. Because many characters have real-life counterparts (as outlined by Barbara White), critics concur that *Our Nig* probably traces some of Harriet Adams-Wilson’s own history. Indeed, Harriet Adams married Thomas Wilson on 6 October 1851, a marriage

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<sup>8</sup> Foster, *Written By Herself*, 9. She continues, “We must discover and understand the context of the fragments left by those whose words were not valued or were devalued. We must, as Winthrop Jordan says, assume ‘the task of explaining how things actually were while at the same time thinking that no one will ever really know.’ And we must do so with full knowledge that individual experiences vary and that the experiences of groups were not static over time or place.”

<sup>9</sup> P. Gabrielle Foreman and Reginald H. Pitts, in their “Chronology I” and “Introduction,” extrapolate from Wilson’s death certificate as well as an 1830 Bedford, New Hampshire, census and argue for 1825 (vii, xxvi).

performed by Rev. E. Hidden in Milford, New Hampshire,<sup>10</sup> and she bore a son, George Mason Wilson, sometime in June 1852. Wilson (née Adams) then appears on the “official” record occasionally as a resident of the Hillsborough County Poor Farm in Goffstown or a “town pauper” boarding around Milford.<sup>11</sup> All these events have parallels in the novel’s final chapter, “The Winding Up of the Matter,” in which Frado marries Samuel, has a child, and moves in and out of public charity during Samuel’s long trips.<sup>12</sup> The “recipe” Frado’s narrator cites there as an income generator finds historical basis in extant bottles of “hair regenerator” sold by “Mrs. H.E.Wilson” around 1856 to 1860.<sup>13</sup> Even more exciting is recently uncovered knowledge of Wilson’s later life as a prominent Spiritualist lecturer around Boston, Massachusetts. News of her work appears in the Spiritualist weekly, *Banner of Light*.<sup>14</sup> Widowed in 1853, Wilson eventually remarried “a young apothecary, John Gallatin Robinson,” in 1870 and subsequently appears in directories and records as “Hattie E. Robinson” or “Hattie E. Wilson.”<sup>15</sup> The pair eventually split, and Wilson served as a housekeeper and nurse for two Boston-area families. She died in 1900.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Henry Louis Gates discovered the marriage certificate (“Introduction,” xv); Ellis, *Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig: A Cultural Biography*, 54, identifies the minister as E. Hidden of the Congregational church.

<sup>11</sup> Foreman & Pitts, “Chronology I,” viii-ix, and “Introduction,” xxvi.

<sup>12</sup> Wilson, *Our Nig*, 70-72; hereafter cited in text.

<sup>13</sup> Foreman & Pitts, “Introduction,” xxx. One scholar also locates Wilson in the 1860 census for Manchester, New Hampshire as a weaver, possibly employed by the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company (Frink, “Feminist Approaches,” 281).

<sup>14</sup> See Foreman & Pitts, “Introduction.”

<sup>15</sup> Foreman & Pitts, “Introduction,” xl.

<sup>16</sup> Foreman & Pitts, “Introduction,” xlii-xliii. In fact, scholars’ research and advocacy for Wilson’s overlooked novel perhaps inspired the Harriet Wilson Project, an organization whose goals are to (re-)introduce and honor Wilson’s work in the region and world and to lobby for its inclusion in New Hampshire’s secondary school curriculum (Boggis, “Not Somewhere Else, But Here,” 308). The Project also commissioned and dedicated a statue of Harriet Wilson and her son George, sculpted by Fern Cunningham and erected in 2006 in Milford’s Bicentennial Park. Book in hand and seemingly

Literary scholarship on *Our Nig*, particularly those materials published after Gates's republication of the novel in 1983, has attempted to situate the novel in various traditions: as part of the canon of American literature, as the first African-American novel published in the United States, as the first African-American novel published by a woman, as a critique of race, as a study of labor and the economy. The discussion was revived at the annual conventions of the Modern Language Association in 2005 and 2006 when William L. Andrews, himself an editor of *Three Classic African-American Novels*—including *Our Nig*, previewed his forthcoming publication (with Mitch Kachun), *The Curse of Caste; or The Slave Bride: A Rediscovered African American Novel*. Their introduction claimed it as “the earliest published novel by an African American woman yet to be discovered.”<sup>17</sup> Of course, this debate over origins of the African-American novel questions the parameters of the “novel” genre and leads us into the territory of the unknowable: what other manuscripts and serializations, some by anonymous contributors, are waiting to be discovered as “firsts”? But the debate can only be healthy as it redirects readers' attention to Wilson's novel and its clever work in critiquing the racial, gendered, and economic oppression of free blacks in the antebellum North.

Most critics identify *Our Nig* as the offspring of the sentimental, or domestic, novel and the slave narrative. Indeed, Wilson's narrator proves fluent with sentimental conventions of addressing the reader, bemoaning Frado's mother's moral condition, and tracing Frado's struggles toward religious conversion and womanhood. The novel, too, has elements of the slave narrative in which the

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mid-stride, Wilson's figure leads us into a future where we—readers and heeders of her message of hypocrisy and constructed difference—finally begin to reckon the wages of race and class.

<sup>17</sup> Andrews & Kachun, “Editors' Introduction,” xiv.

narrator recounts Frado's toil and abuse, her occasional flights into swamps and outbuildings, her epiphanic rejection of abuse at the woodpile, and her eventual freedom.<sup>18</sup> Critics, however, have identified other literary traditions within the novel. Many have noted the autobiographical element of the novel, drawing on the research of Gates, White, Ellis, and Foreman and Pitts. Julia Stern and William Andrews now identify the novel as a "fictionalized autobiography."<sup>19</sup> Gates himself identified the novel as a "fictional third-person autobiography," or novel.<sup>20</sup> Ellis has explored the "realist" aspects of the novel and, in another article, its initiation of an apastoral tradition in which the narrator unveils the labor in the pastoral countryside. The novel certainly opens with an allusion to the seduction novel, as Beth Maclay Doriani argues concerning Frado's mother's "fall" into infamy. Perhaps coincident with the seduction novel tradition is the gothic element Stern traces. Elizabeth Breau is interested in the satiric nature of the novel. Eric Gardner labels the novel a bildungsroman, a label which intrigues me since I will argue for Frado's growth to self-discovery via textile agency. One common theme, though, is that *Our Nig* is a hybrid.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> White has already commented on the "inadequacy" of either of these genres for Wilson's "purposes" ("Our Nig" and the She-Devil," 38-39). Indeed, the sentimental novel, with its emphasis on a heroine's "interiority" and "individualism," including the powers of moral suasion, becomes primarily a white document as these qualities are used in popular discourse to define white womanhood against black womanhood. Claudia Tate, however, discusses how black women authors reclaimed this genre as part of an "emancipatory protocol" near the end of the nineteenth century. See Peterson, *Doers of the Word*, 155-156; Tate, *Domestic Allegories*, 66; and Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 141, on the politics of the sentimental genre.

<sup>19</sup> Stern, "Excavating Genre," 439.

<sup>20</sup> Gates, "Introduction," xi.

<sup>21</sup> For discussion of the influence of the sentimental novel and the slave narrative, see Doriani, "Black Womanhood," 200; Ellis, "Introduction," xxx; Ellis, "Body Politics and the Body Politic," 109, 112; Ellis, *Harriet Wilson's Our Nig: A Cultural Biography*, 77; and Mullen, "Runaway Tongue," 245. For consideration of the novel as autobiography, see Ellis, "Introduction," xv; Gates, "Introduction," xi; and Stern, "Excavating Genre," 439. Ellis discusses realism in "Introduction," xix, and the apastoral in "Our Nig: Fetters of an American Farmgirl," 65. Gardner's identification of bildungsroman occurs in

Wilson had to be cagey in the presentation of her novel. Her shifting narrative techniques—from sentimental novel to slave narrative, for instance—suggest the various ways she herself negotiated Frado's experiences. The shifting ground of her narrative makes the author's position difficult to pin down. The sentimental tradition's invitation to sympathy, for example, should make readers, then, uncomfortable as they are lulled into possession of "Our Nig," the "audacious" title Wilson employs.<sup>22</sup> The sentimental tradition creates a paradox for readers who might sympathize with the protagonist as they are thus divided from her by the racist, possessive title. In turn, elements of the slave narrative—as well as the narrator's caveat that her mistress was imbued with "*southern*" principles—seem familiar and appropriate until we recall that Frado is no slave. She is, in fact, a free black woman in the supposedly enlightened region of New England. The evocation of the slave narrative genre presents a horrible paradox: why should Frado need to suffer and escape if she is already free? Wilson's use of these genres to highlight the untenability of Frado's position is ironic and pointed. Wilson's use of the ironic title "Our Nig" satirizes the hypocrisy of our "good anti-slavery friends"—such as the Haywards, or Bellmonts, themselves<sup>23</sup>—in treating a black servant with such viciousness and greed, as if to take the very life and labor of the girl as if it is their due, as if her race justifies their ownership.

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"This Attempt of Their Sister," 242. Breau studies the novel's satiric intents in "Identifying Satire," 458. Stern considers the gothic in "Excavating Genre," 442; Doriani analyzes parallels to the seduction novel in "Black Womanhood," 200. Nearly all discuss the narrative's hybridity; Ellis, in "Body Politics and the Body Politic," 99; Gates, "Introduction," xxxvi; and Jones, "The Disappearing 'I,'" 40, discuss hybridity in specific terms.

<sup>22</sup> Gates, "Introduction," xiii.

<sup>23</sup> White, in "'Our Nig' and the She-Devil," explains that Rebecca Hutchinson (Mrs. Bellmont) was related to the Hutchinson Family Singers, an abolitionist singing group; White traces the anti-slavery activities of Jonas Hayward (Lewis Bellmont) in Baltimore, where he managed the Singers for a time (35, 37, 38).

### Race in *Our Nig*

Wilson's cageyness responds to the racial discourse of 1859 New England. While professing abolition (and, as Joanne Pope Melish has argued, erasing the regional history of slavery<sup>24</sup>), white New England residents did not necessarily equate abolition with egalitarianism. For instance, the New Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society in *Herald of Freedom* for 31 October 1838 reported, "We do not encourage intermarriage between the white and blacks."<sup>25</sup> Frado's white mother Mag Smith violates this hypocritical stance. She marries Jim, a black man, "descend[s] another step down the ladder of infamy" (9), and elicits "the climax of repulsion" (11). No matter that Jim is "faithful" (10) and hard-working. His race supersedes all of his other qualities. In fact, Mag, "fallen" woman that she is, lowers her standing still further when she transgresses the racial divide to marry a member of an "inferior" race. If laws had eliminated slavery, they certainly had not eliminated the racialism and racism generally pegged to people of color—those African Americans and Native Americans, for instance, who were uniquely eligible for slavery in the United States. Even if the institution were gone, the practices of paternalism and prejudice were still there to construct race.

Even among the abolitionists themselves, a racial divide lurked. In a private letter to her sister, a white female anti-slavery activist reported on a fellow female (black) abolitionist: "Miss R on the contrary has many of the manners and ways supposed to be peculiar to her race. She is not in the least like the pretty one we

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<sup>24</sup> Melish explains, "By the 1850s, then, New England had become a region whose history had been re-visioned by whites as a triumphant narrative of free, white labor, a region within which free people of color could be represented as permanent strangers whose presence was unaccountable and whose claims to citizenship were absurd" (*Disowning Slavery*, 3).

<sup>25</sup> Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, 39.

saw at the N.[ew] E.[ngland] Convention.”<sup>26</sup> This writer, then, subscribes to the stereotypes sustained in the popular press, frequently “ventriloquizing” black speech and behavior in exaggerated and derisive ways.<sup>27</sup> Interested only in “Miss R”’s brother’s exceptionality, they refuse to evaluate her comportment according to their own judgmental behavior, and they thus consign her to a monolithic race. Moreover, to compare “Miss R” unfavorably to “the pretty one” demonstrates the oppressive regime of “sentimental ownership” that concerns Lori Merish in *Sentimental Materialism*. Sentimental ownership enabled white women to claim subjectivity by rendering racial Others as objects of sentiment and proprietary care; it reified a racial hierarchy in which white women, such as the letter writer, played at “benevolence” for “the pretty one.” But this racial hypocrisy did not escape the notice of pro-slavery forces looking to promote their agenda. Historian Leon Litwack writes, “Did not northerners place the Negro in a much higher scale by their rhetoric than by their practice? ‘Go home, and emancipate your free Negroes,’ a Virginia congressman demanded. ‘When you do that, we will listen to you with more patience.’”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, through her narrative, Wilson argued that emancipation was yet incomplete in the North. Racist practitioners continued to find ways to designate racial difference and to take advantage of black labor. Part of New England’s persistent racism, according to Joanne Pope Melish, was to see local African Americans’ generally low economic, legal, and political status as “historically unaccountable” (as if slavery had never existed), thus justifying racist views of African Americans’ “innate

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<sup>26</sup> Weston, “Letter to Miss Deborah Weston,” 13 July 1842. See also Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood*. I do not intend to denigrate the work of the Westons in the anti-slavery movement but to indicate the unconscious racial attitudes even within this group.

<sup>27</sup> Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 165.

<sup>28</sup> Litwack, *North of Slavery*, 39.



inferiority.”<sup>29</sup> African-American authors and activists, however, worked to counter these views, as through the work of the above-mentioned “Miss R” (otherwise known as the successful abolitionist speaker, Sarah Parker Remond, from Massachusetts) and through the writing of Harriet Wilson, the author unafraid to expose northern racial hypocrisy.<sup>30</sup> Wilson did just that as she published and peddled her novel, *Our Nig*, around southern New Hampshire.<sup>31</sup> She rejected passive victimhood, and instead recast herself as the heroine through writing herself into subjectivity.

Although contemporary race theory emphatically declares the social construction of race (and denies racial essentialism), it also acknowledges that race is “real” in practice. Race theorist Lina Martín Alcoff explains,

In claiming that race is an ontological category, I do not mean to say that we should *begin* by treating it as such, but that we must begin acknowledging the fact that race has been ‘real’ for a long time. [...] There is a visual registry operating in social relations that is socially constructed, historically evolving and culturally variegated, but nonetheless powerfully determinant over individual experiences and choices.<sup>32</sup>

The visual markers of “race”—such as Frado’s skin color that Mrs. Bellmont allows to burn and darken or Frado’s raggedy clothes which mark her as a racial dependent—are crucial to sustaining the racial hierarchy. Mrs. Bellmont marks

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<sup>29</sup> Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Litwack, *North of Slavery*, 40, writes that, at the very least, “the northern negro could place his grievances before the public, and few whites challenged his right to do so.”

<sup>31</sup> Gardner, “Of Bottles and Books,” 19.

<sup>32</sup> Alcoff, “Philosophy and Racial Identity,” 16.

Frado with “visual determinants”<sup>33</sup> that not only enforce Mrs. Bellmont’s sense of white womanhood through difference but enable other whites to “read” Frado as Other also. Frado’s visually marked racial identification, particularly during her indenture, determines to a great extent her “civic standing, culture, citizenship, privilege or subordination, and even designations of personhood.”<sup>34</sup> Only when Frado defines her own visual, textile identity—and participates in the textile economy to earn income—does she begin to transcend “subordination,” to elevate her “civic standing,” to claim her “personhood,” and to establish an expanded version of domesticity.

### **The Two-Story White House**

Wilson’s determination not to be a victim appears perhaps most strongly on the title page of her narrative. She writes, “Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In a Two-Story White House, North. Showing that Slavery’s Shadows Fall even There. By ‘Our Nig’” (1). Her ironic appropriation of the derogatory “Our Nig” deflects the term’s otherwise possessive power.<sup>35</sup> Wilson’s narrator draws the term from Jack Bellmont’s accusation to his cruel sister: “Poh! Miss Mary; if she should stay, it would n’t be two days before you would be telling the girls about *our* nig, *our* nig!” (16). The Bellmont family is cruelly casual in its use of “nig” and “nigger” (16), terms which derogate Frado’s “race” and subsume her individuality and subjectivity. Thus, Wilson’s reclamation of these terms provide a cutting juxtaposition as “Our Nig” (the possessively-held racialized figure) is contrasted to

<sup>33</sup> Alcoff, “Philosophy and Racial Identity,” 17.

<sup>34</sup> Mills, “‘But What Are You *Really*?’ The Metaphysics of Race,” 45.

<sup>35</sup> See Ernest, “Introduction,” xlvii-xlviii.

the “Free Black” (the supposedly emancipated, still racialized figure). Wilson’s title seeks to prove that African Americans’ true freedom and equality is impossible in a region that still promotes racial hierarchy through such terms. The title page’s argument is what Gates calls an “audacious act of entitlement.”<sup>36</sup> Wilson boldly turns the possessive term into an accusation of hypocrisy and hatred. Moreover, the extended title, “In a Two-Story White House, North,” indicates the ubiquity of Frado’s story. The narrator confirms, “Two miles beyond lived the Bellmonts, in a large, old fashioned, two-story white house, environed by fruitful acres, and embellished by shrubbery and shade trees” (13). Indeed, then, the novel tells Frado’s particular experiences of racism at the Bellmonts’. But we should not stop there. The reference to “Two-Story” itself indicates dual, if not multiple, coincident story lines occurring all within the novel. On a most literal level, I would argue that Frado’s experiences in the “Two-Story White House, North” are replicated in myriad other two-story white houses across New England.<sup>37</sup>

The “Two-Story White House, North” was not an uncommon piece of construction. If we first take Wilson’s description of the house to be based in autobiographical experience of her time with the Hayward family, we learn that Nehemiah Hayward, Jr. (1779-1849) and his wife Rebecca Hutchinson Hayward “inherited the ‘old homestead’”<sup>38</sup> likely built sometime after 1786 when Nehemiah Hayward, Sr. and his wife Mary moved to unincorporated land that later became

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<sup>36</sup> Gates, “Introduction,” xiii.

<sup>37</sup> Many critics have conducted careful analysis of the title page. See Ellis, *Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig: A Cultural Biography*, 173; Ellis, “Introduction,” viii, xxxii; Ernest, “Introduction,” xlvii; Gates, “Introduction,” xiii; White, “‘Our Nig’ and the She-Devil,” 22; Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 43-44; Warren, “Performativity and the Repositioning,” 16; and Doriani, “Black Womanhood,” 212.

<sup>38</sup> White, “‘Our Nig’ and the She-Devil,” 29.

Milford, New Hampshire.<sup>39</sup> White explains that Nehemiah, Jr. (Mr. Bellmont in the novel) received “half the family farm when he turned 21” when “he essentially took over from his father”<sup>40</sup> We can figure, then, that the farmhouse was built between 1786 when the Haywards purchased the land and 1800 when Nehemiah, Jr. “took over” at age 21. The timing of the house’s construction enables us to draw some conclusions about the house itself, conclusions at least partially supported by Wilson’s novel.

Thomas C. Hubka, in his study of New England farmhouses, presents points salient to the interpretation of the Bellmonts’ “two-story” white house. First, the two-story house, often in “Colonial” style, was a class marker. Hubka writes, “The distinction between the one-story house and the two-story house had important social meaning for the pre-1850 culture of New England. The societal gulf between people who lived in them was considerable. The two-story form conveyed the status of wealth and social distinction (or pretensions to both) in the rural communities of early nineteenth-century New England.”<sup>41</sup> If indeed the Haywards/Bellmonts owned such a two-story house (and evidence does not provide a definitive answer on this point), they were property owners of social prominence whose racial attitudes may have become subject to observation or emulation.

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<sup>39</sup> White, “‘Our Nig’ and the She-Devil,” 28.

<sup>40</sup> White, “‘Our Nig’ and the She-Devil,” 29.

<sup>41</sup> Hubka, *Big House, Little House*, 37. He continues, “In a typical inland agricultural community of Maine in 1802, the ratio of one- and two-story dwellings probably accurately reflected a typical social hierarchy. Out of one hundred and seven houses in Waterford ‘six were two storied, eighty-six were low framed or one-story, and fifteen were log.’”

Second, houses built before 1800 generally fronted south<sup>42</sup> to collect the warming sunshine in a passive solar heating type of system. I find this potential orientation significant in the case of the Bellmonts. Wilson writes in her novel's preface, "My mistress [Mrs. Bellmont] was wholly imbued with *southern* principles" (3). Her house, facing the South and its overt endorsement of racism via slavery, symbolizes Mrs. Bellmont's own philosophical orientation. One could argue that the house also shelters Aunt Abby, Mr. Bellmont, Jane, and Jack—all characters sympathetic to Frado's plight. As critic Lois Leveen argues, however, "While the villainous Mrs. Bellmont and Mary directly abuse Frado, it is the sympathetic whites who rigidly enforce her entrapment in the house."<sup>43</sup> To Frado, at least, the house has all the qualities of a Southern one.

Finally, Hubka's research (and, in fact, any casual drive around the rural sections of New Hampshire) demonstrates that two-story white houses were *de rigueur* for New England and therefore quite prevalent:

By the mid nineteenth century, the tradition of what might be labeled a classical-vernacular style was the overwhelming selection for the articulation of most buildings in New England. This style was characterized by classically derived details employed according to vernacular rules in a consistently stark, minimal fashion. Between 1800 and 1850 this style was visually transformed by the

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<sup>42</sup> Hubka, *Big House, Little House*, 114-115. Northern sides of these houses had fewer windows (to prevent heat loss). Later New England houses were built to front the roads—regardless of compass orientation—in what Hubka calls a move to more "town-oriented way of life" (115).

<sup>43</sup> Leveen, "Dwelling in the House of Oppression," 570. See also Leveen's earlier dissertation, in which she writes, "The role of the sympathizing family members play in Frado's return reveals the sinister paradox at the heart of *Our Nig*: while the villainous Mrs. Bellmont and Mary directly abuse Frado, it is the sympathetic whites who rigidly enforce her entrapment in the house" (Leveen, *The Race Home*, 212).

popularization of white paint for houses, barns, churches, workshops, mills, stores, and assembly halls. This unity of style is one of the most important visual components giving cohesion and architectural order to what we now appreciate as the New England village aesthetic.<sup>44</sup>

I suggest that the replication of two-story white houses across New England also indicates the ease with which other ways of thinking and living might be replicated across the region. In short, I am arguing—and I think Wilson is too—that Mrs. Bellmont's racist beliefs and practices were not isolated to her own two-story house.<sup>45</sup> Such beliefs and practices probably found shelter in many other two-story houses that proclaimed a slave-less history but practiced a persistent racism.

The two-story white house is but one of the “many other little things” that comprise a discourse of racism in *Our Nig*. In particular, I argue that textile difference, deprivation, restriction, and implication form a unitary textile oppression. This textile oppression prevents Frado from participating in conventions of subjectivity and textile domesticity.

### **Textile Oppression through Difference**

Textile difference, particularly in the form of clothing, serves as a “visual determinant” that inscribes racial difference. Frado, for instance, wears a “coarse cloth gown and ancient bonnet” given her by Mrs. Bellmont (38). The age of the bonnet, on such a young woman, indicates its cast-off nature. Only when an article

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<sup>44</sup> Hubka, *Big House, Little House*, 136.

<sup>45</sup> Other critics discuss the significance of the “two-story” structure. See Watters, “As Soon as I Saw My Sable Brother,” 120, 127; Kete, “Slavery’s Shadows,” 212; Ellis, “*Our Nig*: Fetters of an American Farmgirl,” 72; Ellis, “Body Politics and the Body Politic,” 112; Short, “Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*,” 14.

of clothing becomes undesirable through wear or unfashionability will Mrs. Bellmont give it to Frado. Frado, the dehumanized raced object, must complete the process of “wearing out” the rags that Mrs. Bellmont has discarded long ago; Frado merits nothing new. And the coarseness of Frado’s gown is Mrs. Bellmont’s project of disciplinary appareling to desensitize and demean. Lori Merish argues,

Since sensibility was a bodily as well as a psychological capacity, preserving the body’s aliveness to sensation, its capacity to feel pleasure and pain, was endowed with moral urgency, and was seen to have profound ethical and social consequences. Most antebellum reformers assumed that those who were insensitive to their own pains couldn’t be sensitive to others’; and it was in the nineteenth century that ‘mean’—which originally meant ‘common,’ and usually referred to lower-class living conditions—began to take on the moral connotations of ‘vicious,’ ‘brutal,’ and ‘cruel.’<sup>46</sup>

The coarse cloth, Mrs. Bellmont hopes, will roughen Frado’s skin and brutalize her sensibility, rendering Frado incapable of participation in higher sentiment and culture. The cloth acts as a sort of chastisement of race. Of course, one could argue that Mrs. Bellmont’s willingness to attire her indentured servant in coarse cloth signals her own devaluation of sensibility, her own immunity to higher feelings. In any case, the cloth enforces a racial division; the coarse cloth also signals Frado’s low status to other members of the community.

Frado’s coarse cloth gown has compositional similarities to what was popularly known as “negro cloth” in the nineteenth century, and it signals her virtual

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<sup>46</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 145-146.

slavery in the North. "Negro cloth" was a coarsely woven "blend of wool and cotton" deemed good enough to clothe slaves but not suitable for whites. Historian Edward Ball claims, "The rough blue or sometimes white cloth was the standard uniform on the Ball plantations from the earliest colonial days until well into the 1800s."<sup>47</sup> The irony of "negro cloth" production lies in what Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner labeled in an 1848 speech the "unhallowed union" of "the lords of the lash and the lords of the loom."<sup>48</sup> Historian Myron Stachiw claims that Rhode Island, for instance, had eighty-four mills turning out "negro cloth" for sale in the South. The cloth that imposed slavery's visual difference was often produced in "free" New England. "Negro cloth" even became a point of law in the South, where an 1822 grand jury in South Carolina decided, "Negroes should be permitted to dress only in coarse stuffs. Every distinction should be created between whites and the Negroes, calculated to make the latter feel the superiority of the former."<sup>49</sup> Frado's inferiority is designated by the coarseness and condition of the clothes she is given.

Although coarseness proves a primary marker of Frado's difference, poor condition and inappropriate selection provide further "visual determinants." The narrator describes Frado's clothing as she, now aged seven, heads to school in the winter: "Her winter over-dress was a cast-off overcoat, once worn by Jack, and a sun-bonnet" (21). The sun-bonnet, of course, is woefully inadequate for keeping a person's head warm in the winter; it is designed to be a cool, breathable hat to keep

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<sup>47</sup> Ball, *Slaves in the Family*, 97.

<sup>48</sup> Sumner, "Speech for Union," 256-257. Sumner's cousin, Harriet Coffin Sumner, married in 1839 Nathan Appleton, a textile mill owner and distant cousin of Francis Cabot Lowell. Appleton was born in 1779 in New Ipswich, New Hampshire, not far from the Haywards ("Nathan Appleton").

<sup>49</sup> "Textile Firm Linked to 'Negro Cloth' for Slaves." The article discusses textile manufacturer Westpoint-Stevens's past history of "negro cloth" production through Pepperell Manufacturing which was purchased in 1965.



off the sun. Jack's "cast-off overcoat," however, is the coup de grace of her ensemble. As a male garment, it disputes Frado's female identity signaled by the sun-bonnet; thus, "signs of masculinity and femininity merge."<sup>50</sup> Moreover, her outdoor labor with the farm animals in addition to her domestic chores further ungenders her; her clothes here anticipate Mrs. Bellmont's continuing project of beating her "into a polymorphous transsexual blur."<sup>51</sup> In her attempts to transform Frado into an ungendered, racialized Other, Mrs. Bellmont creates an object. This Frado-as-object, in turn, completes a process of objectification by which Mrs. Bellmont affirms her own sense of self as middle-class white matriarch in contrast to the Frado-object as lower-class, black, ungendered thing. Frado-as-object, then, "externalize[s] values and meaning embedded in social processes, making them available, visible, or negotiable for further action by subjects."<sup>52</sup> The visual presence of Frado-as-object reifies Mrs. Bellmont's racialized, hierarchical world view.<sup>53</sup>

Frado's receipt of cast-off clothes establishes her difference, her status as a textile outsider. Her clothes are the textile detritus of the family, long abandoned and uninvested with sentiment. On the other hand, Mrs. Bellmont's daughter Mary has access to her mother's clothing. When Mary prepares for a trip to Baltimore with her brother Lewis, she ransacks the Bellmont stores: "So all the trunks were

<sup>50</sup> Krah, "Tracking Frado," 474.

<sup>51</sup> Stern, "Excavating Genre," 444.

<sup>52</sup> Myers, "Introduction: The Empire of Things," 20. Daniel Miller, on whose work Myers draws here, explains, "In objectification all we have is a process in time by which the very act of creating form creates consciousness or capacity such as skill and thereby transforms both form and the self-consciousness of that which has consciousness, or the capacity of that which now has skill" ("Materiality: An Introduction," 9). Miller notes a "dialectics of objectification" ("Materiality: An Introduction," 38).

<sup>53</sup> When Frado is a young woman, she ruefully recognizes that she is "anything but an enticing object," with her worn clothes and shorn hair (471). This litotic construction of Frado as object, however, counteracts Frado's oppression. The statement suggests that with hair and finer clothes Frado could be "an enticing object." And an "object" with the agency to "entice" may, in fact, be a subject.

assembled and crammed with the best selections from the wardrobe of herself and mother, where the last-mentioned articles could be appropriated" (44).<sup>54</sup> Mary's tipping in her mother's textiles reinforces their mutual identification as privileged white females. Critic Iris Marion Young explains that the sharing of clothes, particularly among women, is not a sharing of property but of lives.<sup>55</sup> In fact, "Clothes often serve for women in this society as threads in the bonds of sisterhood."<sup>56</sup> Mrs. Bellmont and Mary, as Wilson suggests in her narrative, are mutually sanctioning in their flights of cruelty; Mary "was indeed the idol of her mother, and more nearly resembled her in disposition and manners than the others" (15). They are indeed sisters in the sense of shared racial identification against Frado, and their shared clothing makes visible their assumed difference.

Material culture theorist Judy Attfield attests to the intimacy of textiles as they mediate between the body and the world: "The social construction of subjectivity can be observed objectified via garments in relation to the body, and via interior décor of the immediate intimate domestic environment."<sup>57</sup> Thus, because Frado does not select or construct her own clothes during her indenture, she is the slate upon which Mrs. Bellmont and Mary inscribe their racial superiority.

Perhaps the most vivid textile image in *Our Nig* is Frado's appearance at the funeral of James Bellmont. James's widow Susan provides Frado with a "mourning dress"—presumably black (or at least suitably dark) and of fine material honoring the

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<sup>54</sup> I cannot let Wilson's great humor go unacknowledged. After Frado assists in Mary's preparations, she asks Aunt Abby, "Did n't I do good, Aunt Abby, when I washed and ironed and packed her old duds to get rid of her, and helped her pack her trunks, and run here and there for her?" (478).

<sup>55</sup> Young, "Women Recovering Our Clothes," 206.

<sup>56</sup> Young, "Women Recovering Our Clothes," 205.

<sup>57</sup> Attfield, *Wild Things*, 124.

solemn occasion—and, at the last minute, an old bonnet of Mary's, "trimmed with bright pink ribbon" (54). The frivolity and anomalous nature of the pink ribbon, particularly as juxtaposed against others' mourning attire, makes Frado's grief seem less deep or sincere.<sup>58</sup> The novel's narrator shifts to Susan as the focalizer to explain and to accord responsibility for the gaffe: "It was too late to change the ribbon, and she [Susan] was unwilling to leave Frado at home; she knew it would be the wish of James she should go with her. So tying it on, she said, 'Never mind, Frado, you shall see where our dear James is buried'" (54). Frado is thus cleared of blame in the jarring element of her attire, but she is still wounded by the judgment of the community:

As she [Frado] passed out, she heard the whispers of the by-standers, 'Look there! see there! how that looks,—a black dress and a pink ribbon!'

Another time, such remarks would have wounded Frado" (54-55).

The passage proves that Frado, despite her textile oppression, is knowledgeable in the lexicon of textile use.<sup>59</sup> Her observations in the community, at school, and at the Bellmont home provide her with a textile education that she is unable to put into practice in her own room and form. In other words, Frado is not an unwitting victim of textile oppression, but a subject fully conversant in the ways textiles are used to oppress her and to mark her difference.

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<sup>58</sup> Here the pink ribbon marks Frado's difference. It also is reminiscent of Faith Brown's pink ribbon in "Young Goodman Brown" (1835) or Tess's red one in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891).

<sup>59</sup> Clothing critic Marilyn J. Horn explains how inconsistencies reveal the disconnection between clothing and situation. She specifies problems such as grooming, manners, or condition of the hands (from labor) as signs that may belie the appropriateness of clothing (*The Second Skin*, 111). In the particular instance I cite, Frado is aware that the pink ribbon is a mismatch for the mourning dress; the mismatch may cause the by-standers to question Frado's identity.

### **Textile Oppression through Deprivation**

Textile oppression is most obviously enacted through textile deprivation. Frado's bare feet—no socks or shoes—are a clear example (37). Textile deprivation also frequently appears in *Our Nig* as "scantiness" of dress, leaving Frado exposed to the elements, yet again brutalizing her sensibility. On Frado's very first day of school, she appears "with scanty clothing and bared feet" (18-19). In fact, her dress racializes her even more than her skin. Wilson writes, "As soon as she [Frado] appeared, *with scanty clothing and bared feet*, the children assembled, noisily published her approach: 'See that nigger,' shouted one" (18-19, emphasis added). Wilson's choice of sensory detail suggests that it is the clothing to which the children respond, not Frado herself. Indeed, we learn that Frado's skin must not be so very different from Mary Bellmont's because Mrs. Bellmont sends the servant out into the sun without skin protection (22). If Frado's skin is no reliable marker of her race, then Mrs. Bellmont will mark it with clothing, or its deprivation. Later, Frado's dress is "poor and scanty" (38), and she leaves Mrs. Bellmont's indenture with but "one decent dress, without any superfluous accompaniments" (65). The scantiness of Frado's textile garments not only marks her as the racialized dependent of the Bellmont's bounty but also exhibits her as an unwomanly (sexualized) object. Literary critic Elizabeth Breau suggests that Frado's shaved head, darkened skin, and raggedy clothing are "the only indications of the sexually motivated conflicts that usually predominate in nineteenth-century narratives about female mulattos."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Breau, "Identifying Satire," 463.

In short, Frado's insufficient textile coverings suggest her as a potential sexual victim à la the tragic mulatta.<sup>61</sup> Frado's hair is shaved (38, 39), and her dress is scanty, meager, insufficient. Her body is exposed to the elements in ways that the nineteenth-century middle-class white female body would not be. Most importantly, though, Frado's insufficient apparel represents a sort of nakedness as opposed to the textile trappings of those women who choose their own clothing. Dress theorist Adeline Masquelier explains, "because clothing gives people their ethnic, social, and moral identity, it has generally been assumed in modern Euro-American thought that lack of clothing signifies a 'negative state, a privation, loss' (Perniola 1989: 237). To be denuded, stripped, or divested is to be dispossessed of something one ought to have. From this perspective, being unclothed means finding oneself in a degrading position, typical of the mad, the cursed, or the very poor."<sup>62</sup> Textile deprivation reasserts Frado's place in a racialized society.

Literary critics have done helpful work in demonstrating how the bare room assigned to Frado spatializes her exclusion from the Bellmont family and from white society as a whole. Indeed, *Our Nig* showcases the "home"—vaunted by middle-class domestic advice manuals as the bulwark against a competitive, capitalist economy and as a haven for affectional relationships and moral uplift—in the form of the Bellmont homestead, a fractured domestic organism that thrives on the oppression and exclusion of a child. Thus, "Although a house's façade presents a

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<sup>61</sup> Literary critic Cynthia J. Davis, in "Speaking the Body's Pain," suggests, "We might even want to read such brutalizing scenes as further evidence for the hypothesis that Wilson employs pain in her narrative as a metonym for sexual exploitation" (397). While I do not think the novel suggests any such sexual exploitation, I believe Davis is suggesting this as a possibility for racialized and oppressed characters such as Frado.

<sup>62</sup> Masquelier, "Dirt, Undress, and Difference," 15.

seemingly unified front to those who view it, the internal divisions of domestic space reflect and refract divisions among the house's occupants, as the novel reveals."<sup>63</sup> When one looks inside the Bellmonts' doorway, they soon discover that the family living space is made exclusive by the relegation of Frado to an unfinished space above the kitchen where she labors. The spatial exclusion, textile deprivation, and textile difference deployed by Mrs. Bellmont against Frado are all part of what Hazel Carby identifies as "the sexual ideologies that defined the ways in which white and black women 'lived' their relation to their material conditions of existence."<sup>64</sup> Again, Mrs. Bellmont's establishment of spatial and textile difference enables her, first and foremost, to identify herself against black womanhood. New England discourses of slavery and race as well as domestic advice enable Mrs. Bellmont to rationalize her superiority. Carby explains, "Ideologies of white womanhood were the sites of racial and class struggle which enabled white women to negotiate their subordinate role in relation to patriarchy and at the same time to ally their class interests with men and against establishing an alliance with black women."<sup>65</sup> Thus, in Wilson's novel, "domestic space provides no solution to the intersecting dilemmas of race and gender prejudice Wilson so acutely discerns."<sup>66</sup>

Wilson's novel emerges during a burgeoning movement of domestic environmentalism promoted in architectural pattern books and domestic advice manuals, even as it documents Mrs. Bellmont's deliberate perversion of this

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<sup>63</sup> Leveen, "Dwelling in the House of Oppression," 567.

<sup>64</sup> Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 17.

<sup>65</sup> Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 17-18.

<sup>66</sup> Stern, "Excavating Genre," 458.

practice.<sup>67</sup> Domestic environmentalism emphasized the power of the home environment, and its textile objects, to soften, refine, and civilize domestic space and its inhabitants. Thus we see Mrs. Bellmont defending her parlor against Frado's intrusion, as if Frado could absorb the beneficial environment or somehow taint it. The movement, as I've indicated in my chapter on Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, signified a victory for liberal luxury and consumption and a defeat for civic humanist emphasis on self-sufficiency.<sup>68</sup> But domestic environmentalism involved what Katherine Grier labels a "tension": even as proponents of domestic environmentalism were staging the home as refining sanctuary and "refuge from the rigors of economic life,"<sup>69</sup> they were buying up goods and materials within the competitive market economy they feared. Of course, as an instrument of labor, Frado too is anathema to the sections of the Bellmont house in which Mrs. Bellmont stages herself as the white, middle-class, non-laboring female. Mrs. Bellmont scoffs, "Why, according to you and James, we should very soon have her in the parlor, as smart as our own girls" (49-50). Not only does Mrs. Bellmont exclude Frado from the benefits of a softening environment, she also deploys a negative domestic environmentalism by which textile deprivation is intended to punish and coarsen Frado.

The consignment of Frado to an ell off the main house shows Mrs. Bellmont boldly enacting "the spatializing of hierarchies of power within the private home."<sup>70</sup> Frado's room is "an unfinished chamber over the kitchen, the roof slanting nearly to

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<sup>67</sup> Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 5.

<sup>68</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 34-35.

<sup>69</sup> Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 5.

<sup>70</sup> Leveen, "Dwelling in the House of Oppression," 561.

the floor, so that the bed could stand only in the middle of the room. A small half window furnished light and air" (17). Frado reaches her room through "a dark, unfinished passage-way" only after "passing through nicely furnished rooms" which provide a stark contrast to Frado's chamber (17, 16). Her room is small and, even after years of habitation, "uninviting and comfortless" (48). James Bellmont warns his mother that the family is risking Frado's health to let her "'sleep in such a place'" (49). The heat and cold penetrate the place since it lacks any insulation or finishing plaster to moderate the temperature. Nevertheless, Frado finds it "a safe retreat" because Mrs. Bellmont does not venture there (48). I would argue that only a room lacking in textile decoration could be described as "uninviting and comfortless" and contrasted to rooms "nicely furnished." Her room, likely lacking carpet, curtains, displayed needlework, cushions, or extensive bedding, is an uninsulated, Spartan chamber specifically deprived to highlight her status in opposition to the Bellmonts'. Although members of the community will never see the difference, Frado remarks it daily. We might imagine her waking up to stare at the ridgepole of the ell, throwing her feet over the bed onto the bare wooden floor, getting herself ready, and then moving through the abundant textile environment of the main house to the kitchen. And when Frado physically outgrows her space or rails against its poverty of textile comforts, she will have overstepped her inferior racial place. Mrs. Bellmont warns that when Frado outgrows her "quarters," Frado will "'outgrow the house'" as well (448). Mrs. Bellmont's power rests in disciplining Frado's space as well as her body.

Mrs. Bellmont exerts her most heinous textile oppression of Frado's body through restriction. In Wilson's famous inversion of white, middle-class domesticity,



she exposes the extraordinary malevolence of domestic womanhood: "It is impossible to give an impression of the manifest enjoyment of Mrs. B. in these kitchen scenes. It was her favorite exercise to enter the apartment noisily, vociferate orders, give a few sudden blows to quicken Nig's pace, then return to the sitting room with *such* a satisfied expression, congratulating herself upon her thorough house-keeping qualities" (37). In one instance, Mrs. Bellmont gags Frado with a towel before the violent physical abuse. The narrator reports,

Excited by so much indulgence of a dangerous passion, she seemed left to unrestrained malice; and snatching a towel, stuffed the mouth of the sufferer, and beat her cruelly.

Frado hoped she would end her misery by whipping her to death. She bore it with the hope of a martyr, that her misery would soon close. Though her mouth was muffled, and the sounds much stifled, there was a sensible commotion, which James' quick ear detected. (46)

A mundane domestic textile is put to perverse use in stifling the voice of a (racialized) victim.<sup>71</sup>

### **Implication of the Wool Industry**

*Our Nig*, set during one of several New England "sheep crazes," focuses on the complex weave of wool production, the wool industry, and textile oppression. As previously mentioned, "negro cloth" used to garb slaves was a plain wool weave fabric, usually mixed with cotton. Frado herself is a laborer in wool production which

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<sup>71</sup> See Foreman, "The Spoken and the Silenced," for discussion of voice.

supplied the New Hampshire and Massachusetts textile mills. During one of the narrator's occasional updates of Frado's burdensome chores, she announces, "Flocks of sheep had been added to the farm, which daily claimed a portion of her [Frado's] time" (30). In addition to tending and milking the cows, harnessing the horse to ride to the mill, and later baking, laundering, ironing, and doing dishes, Frado must tend the sheep. After one of the rams proves rough, she playfully lures him over an embankment to teach him not to be so pushy (31). Around the time of *Our Nig's* setting, in 1840, "[s]heep raising in New England was in its heyday, and farmers were involved in real 'sheep mania.'"<sup>72</sup> In 1840, New England boasted 3,811,307 sheep<sup>73</sup> out of a national total of over nineteen million.<sup>74</sup> In 1850, New Hampshire's Hillsborough County (including Wilson's hometown of Milford) tallied 22,706 sheep and an annual wool production of 67,331 pounds.<sup>75</sup> Ten years later, according to the 1860 census, Hillsborough County reported 88,850 pounds of wool; New Hampshire as a whole produced 1,160,222 pounds.<sup>76</sup> In turn, New Hampshire textile mills manufactured over \$9 million in wool goods during 1860; Massachusetts mills \$40.7 million.<sup>77</sup> (The number of sheep steadily declined after that point, as places such as Ohio and New York went into large-scale sheep and wool production.<sup>78</sup>) Milford boasted its own textile mill during Wilson's day: the Milford

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<sup>72</sup> Wentworth, *America's Sheep Trails*, 71. See also Anderson, "Sheep," 55.

<sup>73</sup> *The Seventh Census. Report of the Superintendent of the Census*, 54.

<sup>74</sup> Wentworth, *America's Sheep Trails*, 71.

<sup>75</sup> DeBow, *The Seventh Census*, 26.

<sup>76</sup> Kennedy, *Agriculture of the United States*, 96-97.

<sup>77</sup> Hayes, "The Fleece and the Loom," 45. See also Mudge, *Report Upon Wool and Manufactures*, 122-123.

<sup>78</sup> See Kennedy, *Agriculture of the United States*, 96-97, 184, 188.

Cotton and Woollen Manufacturing Company established in 1810 and producing primarily cotton tickings and shirtings.<sup>79</sup>

A New Hampshire agricultural retrospective, published in 1897 as *New Hampshire Agriculture: Personal and Farm Sketches*, proudly assesses New Hampshire's rural heritage.<sup>80</sup> The book offers a series of personal profiles of successful New Hampshire farmers whose entries vary widely in their intent. Some farmers talk shop: "Potato culture was once a leading feature, and 3,000 bushels of potatoes produced in a year. Subsequently sheep husbandry was largely engaged in, and 250 sheep kept on the place."<sup>81</sup> One emphasizes the attractiveness of his farm; most identify the farmers' political affiliations, and some use this affiliation to excuse their lack of success in election for public office.<sup>82</sup> With typical Yankee attention to the "bottom line," however, the report quips, "From the examples cited in the following pages, it is clearly manifest that farming in New Hampshire has been made to 'pay,' even in the ordinary, material sense of the term."<sup>83</sup> Underneath these nostalgic complacencies lies the submerged labor of the farmers and their laborers. In particular, the statement recalls Mrs. Bellmont's chilling threat, "'I'll beat the money out of her, if I ca n't get her worth any other way'" (50). Frado is made to "pay" through her agricultural and domestic chores even as she approaches

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<sup>79</sup> Ramsdell, *The History of Milford*, 286-287.

<sup>80</sup> Three Milford farmers outlined their successes, and two of them bear possible links to the characters portrayed in Wilson's novel. Christopher C. Shaw, for instance, married Rebecca Peabody Hutchinson in 1846 and established a dry goods store in Milford; Emri C. Hutchinson describes his Milford operation. See Metcalf, *New Hampshire Agriculture*, 136, 138, 313. The book also honors the great work of the Rev. Humphrey Moore in helping to sustain a New Hampshire Board of Agriculture. Moore was the Congregational minister in Milford who married Nehemiah Hayward, Jr. and Rebecca Hutchinson in 1806 (19).

<sup>81</sup> Metcalf, *New Hampshire Agriculture*, 104.

<sup>82</sup> Metcalf, *New Hampshire Agriculture*, 156, and throughout.

<sup>83</sup> Metcalf, *New Hampshire Agriculture*, 10.

collapse.<sup>84</sup> She must participate in the wool industry whose products are instruments of her oppression. And I cannot help but recall that Frado is shorn of her “long, curly black hair” (11), ostensibly because she is getting “handsome” (39). Mrs. Bellmont gets her worth out of Frado much as she does her sheep.<sup>85</sup>

### Textile Liberation

After her indenture, Frado’s textile world changes when she invests, presumably, her two half-dollars (or, perhaps, her new wages) in new clothing construction. Finally she is able to deploy textile power in her own behalf. Despite her weak condition, Frado’s initial freedom is idyllic: “The first summer passed pleasantly, and the wages earned were expended in garments necessary for health and cleanliness. Though feeble, she was well satisfied with her progress. Shut up in her room, after her toil was finished, she studied what poor samples of apparel she had, and, for the first time, prepared her own garments” (65). Frado carefully trains herself in the valuable skill of sewing and transforms textiles into garments. She then wears the clean and healthful garments as a product of her unalienated labor. She asserts her subjectivity through the creation of these apparel objects. Garments, though, have a special bodily presence and lend themselves to the formation of one’s self. Fashion theorist Kaja Silverman claims that “clothing is a necessary condition of subjectivity—that in articulating the body, it simultaneously

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<sup>84</sup> See Ellis, “*Our Nig*: Fetters of an American Farmgirl,” for a discussion of the dangers of rural labor lurking in the pastoral countryside.

<sup>85</sup> Frado is dismissed from her likely indenture with a fifty-cent piece but without the two suits of clothes generally accorded in such instances (Seybolt, 30, cited in Short, “Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*,” 10).

articulates the psyche.”<sup>86</sup> Frado, by creating new clothes, imitates the garment practices of the larger, free community and thus identifies herself with this community. Her emulation “not only facilitates the learning of new social roles, but becomes an important process in the formation of the concept of self.”<sup>87</sup> Indeed, all subjects must discover or work toward their fully-defined self; even Mrs. Bellmont’s sense of self relies on her objectification of Frado. Fortunately, Frado chooses a healthier method to establish her own subjectivity. Historian Mary Ryan reminds us that women are not “fully defined egos, setting individualized courses for themselves through the external world.”<sup>88</sup> Rather, women make themselves through a process of self-discovery and self-transformation. Frado, perhaps recognizing the power of textile oppression, chooses textiles with which to construct garments and to “liberate” her subjectivity.

Moreover, she earns money through her textile skills. The narrator reports that Frado “had become very expert with her needle the first year of her release from Mrs. B” and she is therefore able to earn money through her work (68). Although Frado slips back and forth from subsistence to charity, she never loses the sense of her own subjectivity and ability to support herself. Whether sewing garments, sewing straw hats (68, 73), or peddling “a valuable recipe” (hair tonic) (72), Frado sees that she can ultimately benefit from her own labor. Other scholars have noted that Wilson’s novel is itself a declaration of voice as well as a product of labor which

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<sup>86</sup> Silverman, “Fragments,” 191.

<sup>87</sup> Horn, *The Second Skin*, 95.

<sup>88</sup> Ryan, *The Empire of the Mother*, 6.

she hopes to market.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, the novel is part of Wilson's bid, in Ernest's words, "to transform herself from an object of charity to a laboring subject in an economy seemingly designed to exclude or delegitimize (or both) her labor."<sup>90</sup> Literary critic Thomas Lovell argues that Harriet Wilson and Harriet Jacobs advocate a "salutary view of wage labor" in which "labor is seen as an organic expression of the self and the primary and necessary means of establishing a conception of selfhood" and in which secure relationships are contingent on fair market dealings.<sup>91</sup> Their properly repaid labor leads to "the benefits of self-ownership and agency."<sup>92</sup>

Frado's unalienated labor models how later African Americans similarly claimed subjectivity. In her non-fiction work, *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (1868), Elizabeth Keckley, a freed slave and fashionable dressmaker, documented the success she experienced in the marketplace as well as the trust she enjoyed within women's homes. In *Sentimental Materialism*, Merish suggests that Keckley used her "fashion commodities" "to dislodge the black female body, symbolically, from slavery's processes of ungendering."<sup>93</sup> The garments that Frado sews for herself never become "commodities" in the marketplace; nevertheless, much like Keckley's, they affirm gender and accord subjectivity.

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<sup>89</sup> Joyce Warren claims, "To write a novel was for an African American woman an assertion of identity" ("Performativity and the Repositioning of American Literary Realism," 16). John Ernest writes, "Rather, she [Wilson] envisions a system that recognizes and *capitalizes* on racial tensions and mutual distrust, a new system of exchange and balanced conflict—a new economy of identity—that readers support by purchasing the book and in which they participate by reading it" (*Resistance and Reformation*, 58).

<sup>90</sup> Ernest, *Resistance and Reformation*, 69.

<sup>91</sup> Lovell, "By Dint of Labor and Economy," 1.

<sup>92</sup> Lovell, "By Dint of Labor and Economy," 1. In "Black Womanhood," Doriani refers to Frado's sewing as "a gesture towards her own economic independence" (217).

<sup>93</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 236.

Frado's garments, I would argue, act as types of "transitional objects"; in making them, Frado makes herself. Material culture theorist Daniel Miller says pithily, "It is not just that objects can be agents; it is that practices and their relationships create the appearance of both subjects and objects through the dialectics of objectification, and we need to be able to document how people internalize and then externalize the normative. In short, we need to show how the things that people make, make people."<sup>94</sup> The transitional object, however, involves a particular type of objectification. Frado's garments are not "a form of 'progressive objectivity'" but rather an "'inclusive combination'" that enables a transition in which Frado can be both subject and object.<sup>95</sup> I would argue that Frado's garment construction does not necessarily instantaneously accord her a subjectivity she lacked; instead, the garment process of constructing, wearing, seeing oneself and being seen by others is indeed a "transitional" process in which Frado fluctuates between subjectivity and objectivity. Judy Attfield describes the unique powers of textiles as transitional objects; she calls textiles "the material culture object par excellence."<sup>96</sup> In referring to a child's security blanket or handkerchief, for example, she cites their "mobility," "fluidity, warmth and texture" and their "ephemerality,"<sup>97</sup> so that in the wearing out, the subject wears "beyond" the need. Frado, in her new garments and as a wage-earning subject, accrues new experiences as a force in the market economy. These experiences become associated with the garment—its

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<sup>94</sup> Miller, "Materiality: An Introduction," 38.

<sup>95</sup> Phillips qtd. in Attfield, *Wild Things*, 128.

<sup>96</sup> Attfield, *Wild Things*, 130.

<sup>97</sup> Attfield, *Wild Things*, 130.

collective memories and associations—and do not affect the garment itself but rather “change the user’s practice.”<sup>98</sup> Frado achieves subjectivity.

### **Textiles and African-American Domesticity**

Warner’s novel, *The Wide, Wide World*, demonstrates how proper textile rituals and usages effect sensibility and white, middle-class domesticity; Wilson’s novel, *Our Nig*, exposes how textiles may be pressed into service for the defense of white, middle-class domesticity. In *Our Nig*, both domestic textiles and apparel are the product of an oppressive domestic regime; they are used to impose difference and deprivation on racialized Others. The novel also suggests how the New England textile industry implicates Frado’s indentured (black) labor in a similar fashion to the Southern slave labor used to produce cotton. Frado, in particular, suffers textile oppression until she herself can purchase her own textiles and reconfigure them for her own use.

Wilson’s emphasis on Frado’s appropriation of sewing and textile garment construction is part of a larger African-American tradition, expressed through life and literature, in which textiles are the means as well as the markers of expanded, unraced womanhood. Harriet Jacobs’s grandmother’s cache of domestic linens demonstrates her assertion of domestic womanhood. When the posse comitatus of “low whites” descends upon Mrs. Horniblow’s house to ferret out any signs of an insurrection (in response to the Nat Turner insurrection), they are consternated by her “large trunk of bedding and table cloths”<sup>99</sup> as well as the white bedquilts.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Attfield, *Wild Things*, 148.

<sup>99</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 72.



"Where's the damned niggers git all dis sheet an' table clarf?" one man cries.

Another man tells her, "you seem to feel mighty gran' 'cause you got all them 'ere fixens. White folks oughter have 'em all."<sup>101</sup> The men see the grandmother's textile power as a breach of the middle classes, a violation of white womanhood. Textiles, then, have given Mrs. Horniblow the power to disrupt the patterns of domestic womanhood.

Literary critic Laurie Kaiser cautions against naivete in assuming that women such as the fictional Frado or Mrs. Horniblow ("Aunt Marthy" in Jacobs's narrative) could make the tenets of domesticity more capacious. She explains, "black women were 'painfully aware that they were devalued, no matter what their strengths might be, and the cult of True Womanhood was not intended to apply to them no matter how intensely they embraced its values."<sup>102</sup> Still, figures such as Mrs. Horniblow, Elizabeth Keckley, and Frado persistently practiced the elements of domesticity from which they were excluded.

These figures promote a domesticity predicated on economic self-sufficiency, on the disruption of textile oppression, and on expansive family practices. First, America's slave-holding history, its enduring racial prejudice, and its legal restrictions on African Americans' political, economic, and legal rights have conspired to throw even Northern black men and women into a distinct disadvantage in the marketplace. Any "true" African-American woman must accrue the means to gather her family about her so that she may exercise her moral influence within a home of her own. Therefore, African-American women must acquire economic

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<sup>100</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 70.

<sup>101</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 72.

<sup>102</sup> Beverly Guy-Sheftall (90) qtd. in Kaiser, "The Black Madonna," 99.

stability in a marketplace where labor is justly rewarded. Lovell argues, “Self-support—possible only through human relationships that can be characterized as fair economic transactions—is the only way to acquire a self that can act in a sentimental framework and so is the only means of constructing an adequately sentimental domestic sphere.”<sup>103</sup> Doriani explains that, for a black woman such as Jacobs, Wilson, or her alter-ego Frado, domesticity is predicated on “the ability to survive on her own—emotionally, economically, and politically.”<sup>104</sup> Without economic standing, domesticity is impossible for women such as Frado.

Second, a more racially expansive domesticity rests on the disruption of textile oppression. Characters such as Frado must have the liberty to craft their own textile image and to fashion the nurturing home. Frado’s ability to participate in textile consumption parallels what Claudia Tate has labeled “nineteenth-century ‘black women writers’ general preoccupation with fine clothing and expensive household articles.”<sup>105</sup> Lori Merish, drawing on Tate, argues that writers such as Jacobs and Keckley (and, I would argue, Wilson) associated “consumer refinement and sentimental subjectivity,” thus suggesting “the oppositional uses of consumption as a code to designate a ‘feminine’ civic identity.”<sup>106</sup> Indeed, African-American women “strove to live up to the standards of their white associates. No one’s curtains were as starched, gloves as white, or behavior as correct as black women’s

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<sup>103</sup> Lovell, “By Dint of Labor and Economy,” 25.

<sup>104</sup> Doriani, “Black Womanhood,” 212. Doriani articulates a call for a more expansive definition of domesticity and true womanhood: “They [Jacobs and Wilson] show that the world of the black woman—as a person inextricably bound up with others yet responsible for her own survival, emotionally, economically, and politically—demands a revised definition of true womanhood, a revision of the nineteenth-century white woman’s social and literary stereotype as well as that of the black woman, the ‘tragic mulatta.’ Such a definition must be flexible enough to address issues of race, economic level, and social status” (“Black Womanhood,” 207).

<sup>105</sup> Tate, qtd. in Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 190.

<sup>106</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 190.

in the antislavery societies.”<sup>107</sup> Even toward the end of the nineteenth century, African-American club women celebrated their refinement, education, and domesticity in newspaper social announcements.<sup>108</sup>

Finally, an expansive domesticity relied upon family practices sympathetic to the historical and economic conditions of the African-American community. In particular, Wilson seems to suggest, through her novel and its appended letters, that an African-American domesticity ought to encompass the friends with whom one can achieve emotional and economic stability. For example, it is Wilson’s friend Mrs. Walker “who kindly consented to receive her [Wilson] as an inmate of her household, and immediately succeeded in procuring work for her as a ‘straw sewer.’” Wilson occupies an optimistically situated east-facing “room joining her [Mrs. Walker’s] own chamber,” not a distant, unfinished ell (73).<sup>109</sup> Here then is a stable family group that provides Wilson a home, a livelihood, and a literary education. Wilson’s association with Mrs. Walker demonstrates the strength of a non-nuclear family. Wilson, particularly in her description of Mag Smith’s relationship with Jim, demonstrates “the liberating possibilities that lie outside the narrow range of acceptable models of family life defined in ‘racial’ terms.”<sup>110</sup> But Wilson’s prime examples of successful families are not of the traditional father, mother, and children kind; in fact, she is most secure in her filial relation to “mother Walker” (74) and in her happy stay with a

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<sup>107</sup> Sterling qtd. in Wexler, *Tender Violence*, 101.

<sup>108</sup> Kaiser, “The Black Madonna,” 101.

<sup>109</sup> See White’s forthcoming article, “Harriet Wilson’s Mentors: The Walkers of Worcester,” for a complete discussion of this family.

<sup>110</sup> Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 282.

single mother and her children.<sup>111</sup> Therefore, Wilson counters what later comes to be known as “the pathological school of black family studies, which accepts the white, middle-class nuclear family as the norm and assumes that all groups should assimilate its values.”<sup>112</sup>

Indeed, the demonic violence of Mrs. Bellmont, or the “She-Devil,” is perhaps the foremost argument for the insufficiency of traditional definitions of white, middle-class domesticity predicated on the nurturing mother. (Mag Smith, too, comes in for her share of criticism of her working-class motherhood which balances accounts by jettisoning children.) Mag and Mrs. Bellmont serve as Wilson’s “refutation of the myth of motherhood as the moral force in an immoral world”<sup>113</sup>; they are “unmotherly—the opposite of the nineteenth-century ideal of women as nurturing, gentle, kind, and chaste.”<sup>114</sup> Mrs. Bellmont is the “inverse of true womanhood”<sup>115</sup> and “everything that ‘true womanhood’ was not.”<sup>116</sup>

Wilson’s *Our Nig* expresses grave concern over the faultlines of a domesticity that rests on racist white, middle-class women such as Mrs. Bellmont. Moreover, as Frado departs the Bellmonts only to be received into successive, unwelcoming charity billets, she learns the limits of conventional domesticity. The novel seems to

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<sup>111</sup> Melish explains, “She [Wilson] receives clearly compassionate treatment in only one of these [households], and it is not a model family but a wife and four children abandoned by a father who has ‘gone West’” (*Disowning Slavery*, 281).

<sup>112</sup> Farnham, “Sapphire? The Issue of Dominance,” 68. She continues, “From this perspective the black family is seen as deviant, being characterized by high rates of illegitimacy, the absence of fathers, and welfare dependency—all of which are thought to undermine female-male relationships and produce adverse effects on the personality development of the children” (68-69).

<sup>113</sup> Krah, “Tracking Frado,” 469.

<sup>114</sup> Breau, “Identifying Satire,” 460.

<sup>115</sup> Leveen, “Dwelling in the House of Oppression,” 569.

<sup>116</sup> Warren, “Performativity and the Repositioning of American Literary Realism,” 17.

preach caution in relation to the racist underpinnings of domesticity;<sup>117</sup> it also presents alternatives in the form of affectional families. Even during Wilson's lowest points at the County Farm, she claims residence in a "Heavenly home" based on her religious faith.<sup>118</sup> Although Wilson leaves this suggestion unexplored, she anticipates the domestic arguments of Irish-Catholic novelist Mary Anne Sadlier discussed in the next chapter. Sadlier's 1861 novel looks to textile discipline as a necessary, positive strategy in combating an overconsumption that I label "textile intemperance." Moreover, in chapter five, I show how Elizabeth Stoddard carries on Wilson's critique of domestic womanhood. Most importantly, Stoddard describes the paucity of domestic spaces that invites market competition directly into the home.

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<sup>117</sup> See Wexler, *Tender Violence*, 53-54 ("what was 'domestic' was established as the antithesis of the daily life of the slave") and Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 50 ("To be bound to the conventions of true womanhood was to be bound to a racist, ideological system") for discussion of true womanhood's racist base.

<sup>118</sup> "Wilson contradicted the very implication that there is no place in nineteenth-century America for a free black woman to be at home when she seized on writing in an effort to author an alternative relationship to domesticity for herself. Upon arriving at the county poor house—as house that is no home—during her pregnancy, Frado writes a poem asking for God's favor, including the stanza

Though I've no home to call my own,  
My heart shall not repine;  
The saint may live on earth unknown,  
And yet in glory shine. (136)

Claiming a religious invocation of the Heavenly home, the poem implicitly denies that Frado's earthly homelessness is a sign either of her moral failing or of God's having forsaken her" (Leveen, *The Race Home*, 221).

**CHAPTER 4**

**IRISH-CATHOLIC DOMESTICITY**

**AND THE PROBLEM OF TEXTILE INTEMPERANCE**

**IN SADLIER'S *BESSY CONWAY***

**Introduction**

Female Irish-Catholic immigrants to the United States had a powerful advocate in the Irish-American novelist Mary Anne Sadlier (1820-1903). Between 1845 and 1900, she published over sixty works, including eight novels about the Irish-American immigrant experience.<sup>1</sup> Her 1861 novel *Bessy Conway; or, the Irish Girl in America* addresses the pitfalls awaiting Irish-American domestics working in New York City's emerging culture of consumption.

My design in identifying Sadlier as an Irish-Catholic writer is not to suggest her as an exception to an Anglo-Protestant world view but rather as a representative of the multiplicity of voices speaking about home formation. Sadlier was an energetic voice for the Irish-Catholic community, a voice that emphasized the Roman Catholic faith as the foundation of home life. In her novels, Sadlier predicates domesticity on a consideration of the church as home and on textile

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Fanning (*The Irish Voice*, 115) identifies a total of eighteen novels, including ten of Irish history and eight of the Irish immigrant in America: *Willy Burke* (1850); *Elinor Preston* (1857, 1866); *Aunt Honor's Keepsake* (1866); *The Blakes and the Flanagans* (1855); *Con O'Regan* (1864); *Confessions of an Apostate* (1858, 1864); *Bessy Conway* (1861); *Old and New* (1862). Willard Thorp, however, identifies only seven "American" novels (101), perhaps because *Elinor Preston* is set in Montreal. He claims "at least twenty other novels, most of them making use of episodes in Irish history" (*Catholic Novelists*, 99, note 65).

“temperance,” or prudence and modesty in textile use. Certainly, fictional representations of Catholic middle-class domesticity do not appear very much different from Protestant varieties espoused in Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*, for example. Middle-class Catholic mothers, such as in Sadlier’s novel *Bessy Conway*, still nurture their children in textile-softened homes furnished with an eye to comfort, sanitation, and uplift; mothers still assume the roles of spiritual mentors and examples of Christian virtue for their families and servants.

Many of Sadlier’s notions of domesticity match, for example, those of Protestant educator Catharine Beecher, whose work I will discuss further below. Both acknowledge the refining, uplifting properties of a thoughtfully maintained environment. Both urge moderation in textile decoration and garments. Both argue for middle-class domesticity even for the working classes, since servants live and work in such homes and may enter the middle class themselves someday. The mid-nineteenth-century Catholic fiction I study here imagines aspects of domestic ideology as crucial to all classes, even the working-class domestics of *Bessy Conway*. Sadlier argued that good servants eventually became good mistresses, that their knowledge and industry enabled them to transcend class and to expand their good influence among their families and dependents. Sadlier scholar Liz Szabo suggests that Irish-Catholic immigrants such as Sadlier and her protagonist Bessy Conway may in fact have “shared many of the values of the American cult of domesticity” even as they “created a Catholic version.”<sup>2</sup> In her fiction, Sadlier

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<sup>2</sup> Szabo, “My Heart Bleeds,” 6/12. Eminent historian Hasia Diner writes, The relationship of Irish women to the culture of American womanhood in the last half of the nineteenth century defies easy categorization. Irish women adhered to a behavioral code that deviated markedly from that celebrated ‘cult of true womanhood’

depicts conventional middle-class domesticity as well as the issues of working-class domesticity; her attention, however, is particularly focused on urban domesticity. I argue that Sadlier's "Catholic version" of domesticity diverges in key ways.

First, Sadlier urges her readers and characters (particularly domestic servants) to treat the Catholic Church as a home. Live-in servants with no home of their own may contribute to the up-building and refining furnishing of permanent parent churches to which they can return regardless of their domestic transience. The Church acts as a spiritual "mother" and its clergy as "father"; its institutions attend to parishioners' physical needs. Catholic hospitals and shelters provide a religiously familiar option to state- and Protestant-run systems.

Second, Sadlier regards domestic practice as a primarily defensive ideology and secondarily a missionizing one. Her novels describe close-quartered urban settings where classes mingle; proper domestic practice and textile consumption provide the means of coping with tensions of assimilation. The single-family home, moreover, although valued for the spatial buffer it provided for a family's privacy, was a rare commodity for aspiring middle-class immigrants in a tenemented New York City. Moreover, Sadlier's work seeks to guard the virtue of the Irish-Catholic immigrant, at this time typically a late-marrying urban resident with a traditional regard for celibacy, especially in relation to religious orders which provided a viable occupation for males and females who did not wish to marry. A recognition of the

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that commanded American women to lead lives of sheltered passivity and ennobled domesticity. Irish women viewed themselves as self-sufficient beings, with economic roles to play in their families and communities. (*Erin's Daughters*, xiv)

Diner explains that Ireland's "extremely high rate of widowhood" encouraged women's enterprise through "spinning, sewing, and store-keeping," for example (*Erin's Daughters*, 27). Irish women did not abandon this economic strategy when they came to America.



Irish-Catholic immigrant demographic, including a predominance of single, working females, justifies Sadlier's emphasis on the Church as home.

Third, Sadlier's defense of domesticity for both middle- and working-classes rests on textile temperance. Textiles, used so ably in Warner's novel to refine its characters, are dangerous when their rules of use are ignored. The urban, immigrant environment is awash in textile temptation and many women use textiles intemperately, to great harm. Textile intemperance, then, is an urgent cause. Sadlier focuses particularly on female servants' dress—the primary form of textile consumption available to women who live in others' homes—which leads to idolatry and a false sense of station. Textile consumption must be curtailed to promote the accumulation of savings and the avoidance of vice necessary to improvement; the American "levelling institutions"<sup>3</sup> of democracy give improper notions of dress and the sense of being able to leapfrog the labor and education necessary to enter the middle class "justly."

I argue that Sadlier's discussions of working-class Catholic textile use promote an altered form of domesticity that emphasizes the Catholic Church as home and negotiates dangerous urban conditions. Although Sadlier attends occasionally to textile furnishings in domestic interiors, she spends ample detail and comment on garments. To her, textile garments should provide an index of one's station, one's obedience to God, and most importantly, one's home virtues. Sadlier believes that training in proper textile temperance may enable working-class Irish Catholic girls to enter generally exclusive middle- and upper-class domesticity and to effect conversion.

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<sup>3</sup> Sadlier, *Old and New*, 91. Here Madame Von Wiegel is speaking to her daughter, Bertha.

### Entering the Irish-Catholic Literary Milieu

Born in 1820, Mary Ann Madden Sadlier was herself an Irish-Catholic immigrant, living in New York and Montreal from 1844 till her death in 1903. Madden emigrated to Montreal from Ireland in 1844 after the death of her father Francis, a merchant in County Cavan. (Her mother, omitted in biographies, died earlier.) Francis Madden's poor financial condition upon his death may have made emigration appealing to Mary Ann, and one biographer proposes that the formerly well-to-do young lady may have actually worked as a domestic for a time.<sup>4</sup> If true, this would partially account for her good understanding of the challenges faced by Bessy and her peers in the 1861 novel.<sup>5</sup> Madden's own literary past—she had published poetry in London's *La Belle Assemblée* while in her late teens—may have contributed to the attraction between the young Madden and the publisher James Sadlier, one half of the major Catholic publishing house of D. & J. Sadlier & Co. The pair married in 1846 and had six children before moving to New York City in 1860 where they worked with the New York branch of the company.

Sadlier found a ready market for her writing with the publishing house, and they, in turn, profited from her popular novels, plays, columns, catechisms, and translations. Often Sadlier's novels were initially serialized in the family-owned Catholic weekly paper, the *New York Tablet: A Family Journal*, and later published

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<sup>4</sup> O'Reilly, "Mary Ann Sadlier," 2/17, 3/17.

<sup>5</sup> As I argue later, I propose that Sadlier's novel *Bessy Conway* narrativizes the framework of advice to young Catholic working women provided by Father George Deshon's 1860 guide, *Guide for Catholic Young Women Especially for Those Who Earn Their Own Living*.

in volumes. She also edited the *Tablet*,<sup>6</sup> an incarnation of an earlier paper edited by staunch friend and fellow journalist Thomas D'Arcy McGee (1825-1868), the controversial one-time Irish revolutionary and later critic of Irish nationalist movements.<sup>7</sup> After her husband's death in 1869, Sadlier eventually lost both her copyrights and her stake in the publishing company to a nephew.<sup>8</sup> She returned to Montreal sometime in the 1880s where she died in 1903. She is buried in Calvary Cemetery in Woodside, Long Island beside her husband James and not far from their former summer place at Far Rockaway.<sup>9</sup> Sadlier's devout literature and charitable efforts, including the establishment of homes for orphans, seniors, and "friendless girls,"<sup>10</sup> earned the praise of her readership and, a year before her death, "a special blessing from Pope Leo XIII in recognition of her illustrious services for the Catholic Church."<sup>11</sup>

This chapter turns on the notion of a Catholic publishing tradition largely separate from yet parallel to "mainstream" Anglo-Protestant publishing of authors such as Warner, Stowe, Alcott, Stoddard, or Phelps. To ignore this great and largely underinvestigated realm of fiction is to discount the unique contributions of Catholic authors, some of them recent immigrants, to concepts of domesticity. Moreover, Sadlier's membership in a prestigious religious and literary milieu heightened her

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<sup>6</sup> O'Reilly, "Mary Ann Sadlier," 6/17.

<sup>7</sup> "McGee."

<sup>8</sup> Saxton, "Mary Anne Sadlier," 553. The William H. Sadlier Company still exists on Pine Street in New York; it continues to publish Catholic texts, particularly those for school use under the Sadlier-Oxford imprint ("Our History").

<sup>9</sup> Lacombe, "Frying Pans," 102.

<sup>10</sup> Saxton, "Mary Anne Sadlier," 553.

<sup>11</sup> Biographical information is available in Thorp, *Catholic Novelists*, 98-101; Fanning, *The Irish Voice*, 114-115; Lacombe, "Frying Pans," 292-295; Blain, Clements, & Grundy, "Sadlier, Mary Anne," 939; Howes, "Discipline," 140-142; O'Reilly, "Mary Ann Sadlier," 1-17; Szabo, "My Heart Bleeds," 1-12; Saxton, "Mary Anne Sadlier," 553; and Lacombe, "Frying-Pans," 105.

influence and visibility in print culture. She entertained and consulted such prominent Catholics (not necessarily Irish) as journalist Orestes Brownson; Archbishop John Hughes; Thomas D'Arcy McGee; Dr. Henry James Anderson, Columbia Professor of Mathematics and Astronomy; William Denman, "son of the publisher of the *Truth Teller*, New York's first Catholic weekly"; novelist J.V. Huntington; and Levi Silliman Ives, a former Episcopal bishop.<sup>12</sup> Catholic publications, indeed, were not an anomaly. Catholic publishing houses worked from major American cities—thus suggesting both the Catholic dispersion and literary demand—, including Edward Dunigan, P. O'Shea, and P.J. Kenedy and Sons, all of New York; Baltimore's John Murphy and Hedian & O'Brien; Patrick Donahoe in Boston; and, of course, D[ennis] and J[ames] Sadlier of Boston, Montreal, and Barclay Street in New York.<sup>13</sup>

I think it important to note here the major figure Sadlier cut in the literary world of her time. Sadlier was "the first important woman in Irish-American publishing," and her books were, at one time, widely available.<sup>14</sup> Critic Willard Thorp claims that "Many of her novels were kept in print for 50 years or more,"<sup>15</sup> and Charles Fanning notes, "*Bessy Conway* had six American editions in the nineteenth century, more than any other Sadlier novel with an American setting."<sup>16</sup> Her books were "read to pieces"<sup>17</sup> and are to be found now only in the Arno Press reprint (of *Confessions of an Apostate*, 1978) and microform. Her popularity originated in her themes of Irish-

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<sup>12</sup> See Thorp, *Catholic Novelists*, 100-101; Fanning, *The Irish Voice*, 115.

<sup>13</sup> Thorp, *Catholic Novelists*, 54-55; Fanning, *The Irish Voice*, 77.

<sup>14</sup> Fanning, *The Irish Voice*, 75.

<sup>15</sup> Thorp, *Catholic Novelists*, 98.

<sup>16</sup> Fanning, *The Irish Voice*, 134.

<sup>17</sup> Thorp, *Catholic Novelists*, 99, note 65.

Catholic immigrant life—quite appealing to the large Irish-Catholic audience in the United States, a population prominent in her adopted city of New York. In Manhattan alone around 1861, Irish immigrants comprised over one quarter of the inhabitants.<sup>18</sup>

Irish immigrants, particularly women taking work as domestics, were quickly acculturated to white, middle-class notions of domestic arrangement. The young women learned new practices for cooking, cleaning, and laundering, and for handling the specialized domestic goods and textiles present in the American middle-class home.<sup>19</sup> Their knowledge of tasks in home industry such as spinning, weaving, or churning had little value in the U.S. market economy, but their labor had worth. Domestic servants, including Bessy's peers, earned an average of six dollars per month<sup>20</sup> and were able to send nest eggs back "home" to Ireland.<sup>21</sup>

Historian Hasia Diner, in her study of Irish immigrant women, 1840-1900, explains that the Irish immigration was "heavily female and single"<sup>22</sup> during Sadlier's time, unlike the German and Italian immigrants or the Polish and Russian Jewish immigrants who tended to emigrate in family groups.<sup>23</sup> Irish immigrant women, then, were well suited to serve as live-in domestics for American middle-class families and quickly filled those positions. In fact, "[b]y 1855, 74 percent of New York's domestics

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<sup>18</sup> Historian Robert Ernst reports that around 1861 "the combined population of New York City and Brooklyn exceeded 1,000,000. On Manhattan Island alone, nearly 384,000 (or 48 per cent) of the 805,000 inhabitants were born outside the United States. Among these newcomers, over 200,000 were natives of Ireland; 120,000 were born in Germany, 27,000 in England, 9,000 in Scotland, and 8,000 in France" (184).

<sup>19</sup> Stansell, *City of Women*, 162-163.

<sup>20</sup> Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 67; Sadler, *Bessy Conway*, 122.

<sup>21</sup> Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 122. In the ten years after the Famine, Ireland received nearly twenty million dollars from Irish immigrants working in the United States.

<sup>22</sup> Diner, *Erin's Daughters*, 39.

<sup>23</sup> Griggs, "4.3 Competition," 302; Diner, *Erin's Daughters*, 80, 83.

were Irish.”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Irish women honored Irish cultural practices that favored their service: they generally married late, if at all, and they maintained a strong tendency to gender segregation. The Irish girls, although possibly unfamiliar with middle-class domestic routines, at least spoke English and thus were ready learners. These three factors made Irish women ideal for service work; they could work as live-in servants longer and could receive instruction.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the Irish valued celibacy and respected both male and female church vocations barring marriage.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, remaining single to work in service, while not a religious vocation, still did not defy Irish gender expectations which were accepting of adult celibacy.<sup>27</sup>

While Sadlier's novels promote limited acculturation through material practices of housekeeping (learning to tend and use refining home goods), they resist the assimilation of Irish-Catholics into Protestant culture. Sadlier's novels, including *Bessy Conway; or, The Irish Girl in America* (1861); *Old and New; or, Taste versus Fashion* (1862); *The Blakes and the Flanagans; A Tale Illustrative of Irish Life in the United States* (serialized 1850, book 1855); *Con O'Regan* (1864); and *Confessions of an Apostate; or Leaves from a Troubled Life* (serialized 1858, book 1864), show Irish immigrant protagonists fighting against American institutions such as Protestant-biased public schools, landlords who serve meat on Fridays, mixed marriages, and nativism as well as the urban vices of alcoholism, sexual immorality, and mass consumption. Her novels are carefully plotted and never hasty; they show a good understanding of character types, working life, and urban

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<sup>24</sup> Stansell, *City of Women*, 156.

<sup>25</sup> Katzman, *Seven Days*, 69; Diner, *Erin's Daughters*, 4, 50.

<sup>26</sup> Diner, *Erin's Daughters*, 130, 4, 50.

<sup>27</sup> Diner, *Erin's Daughters*, 4, 50.

temptations. In contrast, some of her characters from various novels, such as Bessy, the Flanagans, and Con and Winny O'Regan, are such paragons of steadfast virtue that they are perhaps "unsympathetic" or flat.<sup>28</sup> Bessy, in fact, "displays inhuman levels of piety and obedience."<sup>29</sup> The characters' exemplary nature reflects their use as models of instruction for readers.

Sadlier's didactic, moralizing novels—a far cry from what Fanning calls the earlier satiric and subversive Irish immigrant literary tradition—filled a great void for immigrants struggling with the Famine, Irish national strife, nativist tensions in the United States, racial typing and prejudice, and poverty.<sup>30</sup> Critics Marjorie Howes and Liz Szabo explain that, to many, Sadlier's works served as "survival guides"<sup>31</sup> with a "functional ideology" of immigrant assimilation and provided a "sociological" insight into the Irish immigrant community.<sup>32</sup> Fanning, on the other hand, labels her work anti-assimilationist and conservative. He notes that her last three American novels entail the protagonist's return to Ireland after disillusionment with the United States. If Sadlier's works are indeed "survival guides," they are so because they model how to be a Catholic American in a largely Protestant society. Sadlier's exemplars remain loyal to Catholic schools and practices; they eschew politics and a culture of consumption.

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<sup>28</sup> Fanning writes, "Still and all, despite her real contributions in troubled times, Mary Anne Sadlier remains an unsympathetic writer. In contrast to the all-too-human ambivalence of a Charles Cannon, the iron-clad certainties of Sadlier are disturbing. She is the most persistent of propagandists and her armor never cracks. Her manipulation of plots, characters, and literary conventions is single-minded, self-assured, and sometimes merciless," and she shows "her profound distrust of pleasure" (*The Irish Voice*, 140).

<sup>29</sup> Szabo, "My Heart Bleeds," 5 of 12.

<sup>30</sup> Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 2-10.

<sup>31</sup> Szabo, "My Heart Bleeds," 2 of 12.

<sup>32</sup> Howes, "Discipline," 140-141. Howes outlines these conventional views of Sadlier's literature before advancing her own argument of Sadlier's "counter-cultural" project.

Sadlier's novels theorize subversive views that complicate notions of sentimental narrative and American identity. Howes outlines Sadlier's opposition to certain Protestant-American constructs. For instance, Sadlier rejects "the private Protestant sentimental theory of discipline," or discipline "through love" and personal "moral authority"—whose changeability or contingency contradicts unchanging, infallible Church doctrine.<sup>33</sup> Sadlier also scorns Americans' stubborn insistence on individual rights,<sup>34</sup> and she modifies the independent private family unit in favor of community discipline through orality such as gossip, pranks, and Church doctrine.<sup>35</sup> Howes suggests that these themes in Sadlier's works show a faith in systems "inimical" to American "individualism" in its religious, political, and economic forms.<sup>36</sup> Szabo, too, recognizes that Sadlier's work "casts a dark shadow on the promise of immigration and assimilation for Irish immigrants."<sup>37</sup> Works such as *Bessy Conway*, *Confessions of an Apostate*, and *Old and New* portray their protagonists decamping eastern U.S. cities for Ireland (and, in the case of *Con O'Regan*, for Ireland-like Iowa) after struggling against nativism and intemperance, prompting Fanning's label of "anti-assimilationist." Her novels, perhaps subversively, expose the bankruptcy of the American dream for Irish-Catholics—the fruitlessness of hard work except when rewarded by a *deus ex machina* such as in her novels *Con O'Regan* or *Willy Burke*<sup>38</sup>—and the safety to be found in isolated, Irish rural villages nurtured by

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<sup>33</sup> Howes, "Discipline," 163, 163, 155. Papal infallibility in matters of faith and morals was established by Pope Pius IX in 1870.

<sup>34</sup> Howes, "Discipline," 156.

<sup>35</sup> Howes, "Discipline," 165.

<sup>36</sup> Howes, "Discipline," 169. Sadlier's work, then, serves to clarify historian Hasia Diner's notion of economic self-sufficiency. Sadlier, too, emphasizes personal financial independence, but she also locates Irish-Catholics within a mutually sustaining community that is subservient to Church teaching.

<sup>37</sup> Szabo, "My Heart Bleeds," 1 of 12.

<sup>38</sup> Fanning, *The Irish Voice*, 128, 129.



benevolent priests. If she seems anti-assimilationist, she has her reasons in American failures to live up to ideals of religious tolerance.

Her novels do not address in any literal or overt sense, at least, the national and international strife coincident with their composition. The eruption of the Civil War in 1861 shows no obvious impact on the 1861 serialization of *Bessy Conway* in the *New York Tablet* between January 5 and June 1; the loss of Pope Pius IX's temporal power to Italian unification receives no mention. This is not to say, however, that Sadlier was ignorant of or untouched by these events. Her novels model, usually on a municipal or parish level, means of negotiating contentious public issues that are often localized forms of national strife. For instance, Sadlier's novels depict tensions of Irish participation in American society, tensions that erupted in the 1863 Draft Riot attacks on African Americans and in the formation of an all-Irish militia. Sadlier's sense of urban dangers leads her in one instance to promote a westward, rural migration.

**Framing a Conduct Novel: *Bessy Conway*, *Proverbs*,  
and *Guide for Catholic Young Women***

Sadlier's novel *Bessy Conway; or, The Irish Girl in America* follows the eponymous protagonist's journey from Ireland to America in 1838 and back again in 1845 at the start of the Potato Famine. Sadlier repeatedly punctuates the narrative with apparently digressive scenes and bits of dialogue that comment on social and political debates of the day—the prevalence of Irish (versus English or French) in the priesthood, the Irish Repeal question of independence or home rule, and the

dangers of dress. Twenty-year-old Bessy, apprenticed to a dressmaker in Carrick, is recruited as a lady's maid for an English ship captain's wife.<sup>39</sup> Along with some of her Tipperary neighbors, Bessy embarks for New York, and the ship endures a storm as portentous as experienced by Robinson Crusoe on his first voyage. The ship arrives safely, but many of Bessy's shipmates suffer in the secularized, materialist, urban crucible of New York City.<sup>40</sup> Intemperate materialism in various forms ruins families, breaks up homes, and causes death by *delirium tremens*, fire, and sickness. Sadlier pins some of these outcomes to the initial action of dressing beyond one's means and station. Because Bessy is modest and thrifty in dress, she has a mountain of savings with which to make a heroic return to Ireland in 1845 "just in time" to save the family lease.<sup>41</sup> She even directs the sullen and brutish bailiffs in rearranging the rescued furniture, pewter plates, and bedding. Back at home, Bessy engages in spinning flax and wool, much as the ideal wife, more precious than

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<sup>39</sup> Sadlier, *Bessy Conway*, 6; hereafter cited in text. Bessy, as a dressmaker's apprentice, trains to fit textile material and construction to its wearer's use and station. She is thus already knowledgeable in avoiding inappropriate uses of textiles.

<sup>40</sup> Fanning outlines a pattern of Famine-generation fiction:

1. A hard life of great suffering in Ireland is presented, marked by landlord exploitation, famine, painful eviction from the old home, and the reluctant decision to emigrate. At the same time, the country of Ireland is often seen as an ideal pastoral home, only temporarily despoiled by the British invaders.

2. The crossing to America is seen as a wrenching rite of passage, the violence of which is often symbolized by a fierce storm at sea.

3. The disorientation of the immigrant's first months in the New World is evoked, with swindles, humiliation, and the most dangerous threats to morality and the faith.

4. Right and wrong ways of meeting these challenges are exemplified in the contrasting careers of Irish Catholics who keep the faith and those who lose it. Failure most often means succumbing to drink, dissipation, and early death. Success means working hard, holding a job, and keeping one's family together and Catholic. There are very few spectacular achievements, economic or otherwise, in this cautious body of fiction. The reality of life for this generation was too harsh to support what would have been cruel fantasy.

5. The moral of the story is pointed with directness and emphasis, often four or five times in the last few pages. (*The Irish Voice*, 76)

<sup>41</sup> Szabo, "My Heart Bleeds," 5/12; Howes, "Discipline," 161.

rubies, in Proverbs 31:10-31. Her pre-industrial, feminized labor suggests her family's wholesome non-participation in the mass markets that fuel materialism as well as her representational status as ideal wife and mother, a symbol of domesticity. In any case, Bessy does not spend much time spinning at the whizzing flax and wool wheels. She consents to marry her dogged upper-class suitor, Henry Herbert, after he converts to Catholicism and is shriven for gambling on the bones of monks interred in an eerie, abandoned abbey.

Ultimately, Sadlier's novel *Bessy Conway* is an extended exemplum proving in fictional plots and subplots the primary lesson of the biblical Proverbs: the necessity of taking instruction, particularly with regard to textile consumption. To drive home the narrative rewards of obedience to instruction, Sadlier juxtaposes Bessy's prudent behavior and material prosperity against the headstrong and self-damning actions of others. In fact, the novel's wisest instructors, Father Daly, Paul Brannigan, and even Bessy herself are the most humbly and plainly dressed. Their textile garments reveal a simplicity that suggests spiritual over material interests. In a period when Irish families have split and emigrated in response to repeated famine pressures, the family home is not the primary site of instruction. Instead, Sadlier looks to the Catholic community parish as a home away from home. The clergy and parishioners must take care of the church family.

Wise and refined, Catholic priests serve as the avuncular advisors at the pinnacle of Sadlier's social and instructional hierarchy. In *Bessy Conway*, Father Daly shepherds his Irish flock at St. Joseph's in New York City (123), riding miles about Manhattan to visit his emigrant shipmates and, in one case, to warn against

an imprudent and unsanctioned marriage. At the end of the novel, as he is preparing to head West to evangelize among various Native American tribes, he performs the happy task of welcoming a reformed sinner—one who had repeatedly failed to benefit from instruction, Henry Herbert—into the Catholic Church. Father Ryan is the letter reader and writer for the illiterate among his parishioners in Ireland, and he has the sagacity, subtly implied, to match-make between the redeemed Henry and Bessy.

Paul Brannigan, Bessy's shipmate and well-wisher, is the most intriguing of the novel's wise instructors. Paul is a fool, not in the Proverbial but in the Shakespearean sense. He riddles (83), winks, and nods, and he speaks the truth in uncomfortable ways. He is a hunch-backed "ill-looking dwarf" (53), the "contrariest creature" (98), a "Paul Pry" (99), and an "honest man" (92) in shabby clothes. He knows of Henry Herbert's past sins and goads Henry at every opportunity, attempting to thrill him into redemption. He also trudges the distance from his home in New York City's Fourth Ward to City Hall Park at the southern tip of the Sixth Ward every Sunday. There he teaches the Catholic catechism to the poor newsboys in their patched and torn clothing which also symbolizes the boys' patchy religious knowledge (108, 111). Paul, the deformed shoemaker, strives to obey the sermon he hears: "They who instruct the ignorant shall shine as the stars in heaven" (116). He exults to himself, "Isn't it a great thing for the likes of me to think that I can gain that high place in heaven as well as if I was rich or handsome or well-dressed, or could read Latin like a priest! Isn't it now? So, Paul Brannigan! keep up your heart, and do what you can to make the name of God known and honored!"

(116). Paul's lack of sartorial and educational refinement does not prevent him from doing God's work; in fact, it fits him for proselytizing among the working-class newsboys. Proverbs as the "text" for Sadlier's novel shows that domesticity relies on proper instruction, particularly in textile consumption.

*Bessy Conway* is more than an allegory of Proverbs; I argue that it is also a fictional enactment of the Rev. George Deshon's surprisingly readable guidebook. In 1860, the D. & J. Sadlier Company published *Guide for Catholic Young Women Especially for Those Who Earn Their Own Living* by the Rev. George Deshon, a New York missionary priest at St. Paul the Apostle. Deshon, a roommate of Ulysses Grant while at the United States Military Academy, was ordained in 1855 and "became associated"<sup>42</sup> with Father Hecker who reputedly urged Sadlier to write a novel for girls in domestic service, that is, *Bessy Conway*.<sup>43</sup> Deshon, perhaps himself inspired by Proverbs, provides instruction in the form of specific practical lessons for domestic servants, including sample dialogues to deploy in sticky social and moral situations.

Although I have no documentary evidence that Sadlier read this work herself, I think it highly likely. First, the work is a D. & J. Sadlier publication. Sadlier, as author, translator, and editor for many of the company's published works, probably served as a reviewer for texts under consideration or accepted for publication. Second, the text is an 1860 production by a priest serving in New York at this time. It has spatial and temporal proximity to Sadlier's own 1861 novel *Bessy Conway*. Third, Deshon's work spends three chapters on servants' dress, also a primary

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<sup>42</sup> "Deshon, George."

<sup>43</sup> Thorp, *Catholic Novelists*, 101; Kelly, "A Benefactress," 324.

concern in Sadlier's novel. He also moves, point by point, through specific counsels for young working women.

Sadlier's novel has specific episodes that narrativize Deshon's pieces of advice. For example, Deshon praises servants' work for their employers as service to God, a citation of scripture that Bessy's cheerful, devout, and stout colleague Onny repeats. Deshon writes, "Whatever you do for an earthly master is considered by Him as being done for Himself. 'Whatever ye do, do it from the heart, as to the Lord, and not to men: knowing that ye shall receive of the Lord the reward of inheritance' (Col. iii. 23, 24)."<sup>44</sup> In another example, Deshon condemns the employee who claims piety but who refuses to do as she's bidden by her employer—the specific case of Fanny Powers in Sadlier's *Bessy Conway* (152).<sup>45</sup> He also discourages servants' work in hotels and saloons, places of drinking and gambling, as corrupting environments, another instance of Deshon's advice borne out by the unhappy end of Bessy's colleague Sally who is fired from a decent family and ends up toiling in a saloon (120).<sup>46</sup> And he particularly cautions against participation in a Protestant family's prayers, an episode that Sadlier addresses when Bessy's mistress is enraptured by a Methodist evangelist and commands attendance at prayer, the only order Bessy ever disobeys (205).<sup>47</sup> The connection, if true, is relevant because it demonstrates that what I call "textile intemperance" among domestic servants had provoked widespread, persistent concern. Servants' gluttonous textile consumption threatened class distinction, spurned duty to God

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<sup>44</sup> Deshon, *Guide for Catholic Young Women*, 18-19.

<sup>45</sup> Deshon, *Guide for Catholic Young Women*, 68.

<sup>46</sup> Deshon, *Guide for Catholic Young Women*, 163.

<sup>47</sup> Deshon, *Guide for Catholic Young Women*, 165.

through discontentment with one's "station," siphoned money from the Church, and impoverished needy family members in Ireland relying on domestics' wages.

Deshon's work, addressed to Catholic working girls, and Sadlier's, addressed to Irish-Catholic working girls in particular (iii), also acknowledge the great influence that servant girls wield. New York City domestics, largely Irish Catholic, assumed great power in American homes. Their skills and behavior determined middle-class lifestyles abovestairs; their exercise of morality and reliability influenced household children, cleanliness, and nutrition. Moreover, as Sadlier and domestic handbook writers acknowledged, servants who saved earnings or married "up" sometimes became middle-class mistresses themselves. Sadlier announces in her Preface, "Every woman has a mission, either for good or evil; and, unhappily for society, the lax, and the foolish, and the unprincipled will find husbands as well as the good and virtuous. The sphere of influence thus extended, who can calculate the results, whether good or ill?" (iv).

### **Instructing Against Textile Idolatry, the Root of Many Evils**

Bessy, at work in domestic service in New York City, soon discovers how even servants may introduce disharmony, deceit, and disorder into the middle-class homes they serve. Bessy's first work assignment is as a lady's maid to Mrs. Walters, the ship captain's wife, and as an assistant housemaid while Mrs. Walters resides with her widowed friend Mrs. Matilda Hibbard. Bessy works alongside Bridget the cook, Sally the housemaid, Ellen the nursemaid, and Wash the "colored man" who manages the stable and performs odd jobs. The servants, who spend

their offtime in the basement where Bridget conducts her cooking, provide, by implication, the underpinnings of the household.

Bridget and Sally provide a very poor foundation for the household, however. Urban distractions have turned them from religious duty. When Bessy inquires why Bridget and Sally have not been to Mass, she is attacked. Sally berates Bessy, "Now I'm just going to give you one advice, Bessy! [ ...] As long as you and I are in one house, don't ever dare to pass any remarks on me, whether I go to Mass or not. I guess you won't have to answer for my soul, so it an't any business of yours!" (81) Bessy, strong to the last, tries a gentle tack for her instruction: "Well, but, Sally, [...] between ourselves , now, isn't it a great sin, ay! and a great shame to be so careless about hearing Mass on Sunday, when you know the obligation that's on you?" (81). But Sally and Bridget will have none of it.

In fact, Sally's failure to observe Mass is one sin among many prompted by her textile intemperance, a type of idolatry. Emboldened by her dress, Sally defies her Church and her employer. When Mrs. Hibbard asks her to forego her evening off, Sally asserts her "rights" and departs into the night with her mustachioed beau Jim (72-73). Sally shakes "out the folds of her plaid silk dress as though it were a flag of defiance" (72). Bessy observes "the various gew-gaws which went to make up Sally's flaunting attire" (73) and Mrs. Hibbard notes the "stylish bonnet" that completes Sally's evening ensemble (74). Sally, who has drawn on her forthcoming wages to purchase the bonnet, is turned off by Mrs. Hibbard without a cent. Sally is left with fifty cents to her name—due to the employment agency—and no hint of her next station. Seemingly humbled, Sally returns to beg back her place with Mrs.



Hibbard, and “Bessy saw and heard all this, and she laid it up in her heart as a useful lesson” (76). Sally has given up religious and secular duties for dress.

The Anglican-sponsored, London-published *Advice to Young Women on Going to Service* (1835) portends a doom similar to Sally’s for domestics who indulge a love of dress. The manual regretfully observes that “where [love of dress] has taken possession of the mind, it drives away all desires for better things: and the heart, being filled with trifles, forgets God and has no strength to resist its own vain and foolish inclinations.”<sup>48</sup> The dress-as-idol, here a commodity fetish, takes “possession” of Sally as it demands time for its care and public display. The wearer becomes a slave to the dress and becomes intoxicated with the admiring gazes; she is lost to dutiful life.<sup>49</sup> (Historian Hasia Diner reasons, “the very fact that clerics decried the women’s self-indulgence suggests that it must have been quite widespread.”<sup>50</sup>)

A modiste in Sadlier’s 1862 novel, *Old and New; or, Taste versus Fashion* bemoans the idolatry of dress, particularly among servants whose dress consumption decimates their wages. She cries, “If the love of dress—one might call it the *worship* of dress—could be confined to the rich it wouldn’t be half so bad, and, perhaps, I’d never say a word against it, but when it gets in among the working-classes, and the poor, it’s then it does the harm, and too often brings want and hardship, and sin and shame with it.”<sup>51</sup> Idolatry, here within a Christian schema, replaces the worship of God with the worship of dress; it renounces spiritual welfare

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<sup>48</sup> *Advice to Young Women*, 30.

<sup>49</sup> *Advice to Young Women*, 30-32.

<sup>50</sup> Diner, *Erin’s Daughters*, 141.

<sup>51</sup> Sadlier, *Old and New*, 88-89.

for material in the belief that dress can directly confer power, refinement, membership, or some other coveted quality or character. David Hawkes, in *Idols of the Marketplace: Idolatry and Commodity Fetishism in English Literature, 1580-1680* (2001), explicitly links idolatry and commodity fetishism; each system violates the teleology of the object, perverting its usual use.<sup>52</sup> The commodity fetish, as described in chapter one, represents an object separated from the context of its production and endowed with magical qualities the consumer desires. The fetishization of objects suggests that the object can, by itself, transfer desired qualities to the consumer, a process that Marx critiques. Indeed, Daniel Miller's theory of objectification explains, in part, that objects may serve as agents in the transformation of subjectivity. In Sadlier's nineteenth-century Catholic, domestic ideology, Sally's true failure is in worshiping the textile object as an idol or fetish rather than valuing it as an agent in her inner transformation.<sup>53</sup> Sally's sin in textile consumption is in valuing garments above all other things—including Mass, duty to God, and duty to her employer—thus, in worshiping them.

Catholicism, as opposed to the more ascetic Protestantism, does not necessarily divorce the material object from its immaterial meaning, and it opens possibilities for the powers of goods such as through ritual transformations seen in the transubstantiation of the Host during Communion. Only Catholic priests, however, as descendants of Paul have the power to effect these ritual transformations. Other rituals such as Sally's shopping<sup>54</sup> cannot reinvest the labor of

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<sup>52</sup> Hawkes, *Idols of the Marketplace*, 23; Hastings-Merriman, "David Hawkes," 903-904.

<sup>53</sup> See Sherman, "Mapping the Culture of Abundance." Sadlier's world view directs all worldly activity to God's service.

<sup>54</sup> Bell, *Ritual*, x, 164. She describes shopping and meetings as "ritual-like."

shopping and undo the commodity fetishization or idolatry. Instead, the Catholic Church promotes the power of goods and environment to effect transformation—much like the domestic environmentalism discussed in conjunction with Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* in chapter one. Daniel Rock, author of *Hierurgia; or Transubstantiation, Invocation of Saints, Relics and Purgatory, Besides Those Other Articles of Doctrine Set Forth in The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, Expounded* (1851) explains that the veneration—but not the worship—of objects can instigate inner reflection and transformation. The veneration of Church relics, for instance, leads a person to contemplate the martyr's heroic service to God and invites similar faith and devotion. Church art, devotional habits, and even secular dress can all serve to provoke religious, emotional, or moral contemplation, for instance.

Textiles become the false idols people worship; people admire their own appearance and grow blind to duty. Their desire for more or finer garments than they could ever use drives them to continuous shopping. *A Peep into Catharine Street, or the Mysteries of Shopping* (1846) described this mid-nineteenth-century mode of consumption that turned customers into “shoppers” constantly trawling for new goods. The anonymous pamphlet describes an obese textile consumer who fills his days shopping, trying to find stockings that fit his legs. When he finally finds a pair that will suit, he is thrown into a quandary. He visits the store daily for four months until he finally succumbs and purchases them. He dies soon after.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the consumption of goods, especially textile goods, has become in Sadlier's day a false idol, an all-consuming occupation that replaces duty to one's faith.

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<sup>55</sup> *A Peep into Catharine Street*, 15-16.

Sally's use of her plaid silk skirt as a "flag of defiance" signals not just her rejection of authority, Church order, and class hierarchy (embodied in Mrs. Hibbard). It also suggests Sally's absorption of "American" liberal individualism expressed through her assertion of "rights." Historian Christine Stansell explains the middle-class fear that "high dress among the poor would erase class distinctions and increase insubordination, a perspective which came to prevail in nineteenth-century America."<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the rich garment gives her a false sense of station and unfounded confidence, as if she has the means to supply a wardrobe of such dresses and as if she belongs to the middle or upper classes who normally wear and who can afford such garments regularly. The plaid silk dress, which, we may deduce, has drained her accounts, becomes to Sally a proof of her worth, bolstering her pride and ultimately failing her. She would rather go into debt than dress plainly; she would rather flaunt herself than attend Mass.

Sally's use of the plaid silk skirt to situate her identity in some ways succeeds. The dress is both a form of insincerity (dressing above her station) and a bid to enter a fast and loose social set comparable to Stansell's description of New York's Bowery culture of working-class leisure marked by exaggerated, flashy dress forms and public display,<sup>57</sup> a cultural construct that echoes critic Karen Halttunen's "confidence man" or "man-on-the-make" who apes fashions of the higher classes and threatens class identity with his social mobility.<sup>58</sup> New York men and women had access to ready-made as well as secondhand clothing which enabled them

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<sup>56</sup> Stansell, *City of Women*, 164.

<sup>57</sup> Stansell, *City of Women*, 94, 157.

<sup>58</sup> Stansell, *City of Women*, 94, 157; Halttunen, *Confidence Men*, 31.

continually to play with their representations;<sup>59</sup> fashion offered “both uniformity and differentiation, imitation and demarcation, social obedience and individual expression.”<sup>60</sup>

Sally’s choice of garments actually contributes to the hardening and coarsening of her character. The plaid silk dress which is “a flag of defiance” for Sally rallies her to further indiscretions such as talking back and empty boasting. Sally rustles the skirt with her hand; she admires the make and material which are just as good as anyone else’s, she believes. An 1855 servants’ handbook titled *Plain Talk and Friendly Advice to Domestic; with Counsel on Home Matters* warns, “Remember this: that the attempt of a serving woman or girl to dress in a showy style, marks her out at once to the hawk-eyed libertine as vain and weak, fond of show, and, of course, desirous to increase her means of gratifying her love of ornament, regardless of the proprieties belonging to her station,—precisely the class from whence most of his victims are taken.”<sup>61</sup> The dress is more than a semiotic “prop in the establishment and maintenance of one’s sex and role identities” that expresses Sally’s class aspirations.<sup>62</sup>

Sadlier’s recognition of garments’ actual agency in Sally’s demise relates to material culture theorist Daniel Miller’s discussion of theorist Webb Keane. Miller discusses Keane’s belief in “an integral phenomenon which was the clothing/person” in which “[t]he clothing did not stand for the person.” He continues, “These material forms [such as clothing] *constituted* and were not just superficial cover for that which

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<sup>59</sup> Green, *Ready-to-Wear*, 21.

<sup>60</sup> Green, *Ready-to-Wear*, 15.

<sup>61</sup> *Plain Talk*, 141.

<sup>62</sup> Horn, *The Second Skin*, 92.

they created.”<sup>63</sup> Sally’s consumption and ongoing use of the garment reaffirms what the dress means to her (including its qualities she appropriates) and reasserts its semiotic and symbolic “texts.”

Sally’s textile intemperance and mockery are the sins that doom her to a life with Jim and a life without wholesome employment.<sup>64</sup> Sally, replete with a “flounced plaid silk and light velvet bonnet” (121), initially takes a job “cleaning after all sorts of rowdies in a saloon, for less wages, too” (122). Two or three years later, Bessy opens the basement door of her next employer (Mrs. Delany) to discover “a tall, emaciated woman, with a wretched-looking infant in her arms, and one a couple of years older clinging to her skirt,” there to beg (224). Bessy finds food for the unfortunates, registers the woman’s voice, and recognizes Sally! Sally denies the name and leaves abruptly, dragging her toddler behind. Bessy watches her up the street where she is then accosted by “a miserable tatterdemalion of a man,” “the knight of the black moustache, the veritable Jim” (225). Jim, a drunk, launches a kicking and punching assault on Sally to force her to yield the proceeds of her begging. A policeman intervenes, but he cannot save Sally and her children from the path she has pursued.

Bessy observes from her doorway,

‘So that is the end [...] of all Sally’s dancing and visiting and dressing up, and lying and scheming!—how often I have seen her mimicking others, even those she was bound to respect—what a sight she is now

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<sup>63</sup> Miller, “Materiality: An Introduction,” 32; emphasis added.

<sup>64</sup> True to Proverbs, wise instructors are frequently ignored or refuted by the “simple,” the “fool,” and the “mockers” (Proverbs 1:22). Sally, who “mimics” (77) the reproofs of her mistress in order to elicit derisive laughter, and Henry, who smiles with “supercilious mockery” (51), are the worst of all—the ones who not only ignore instruction but deride it.

herself!—she wouldn't bear a word, or let any one say she did wrong, but she'd fly at them like a wasp—now she has to put up with everything and ask her bit from door to door, in misery and dirt and rags, with her drunken brute of a husband watching to take what she begs for herself and her children!' (225-226)

Bessy's expository musings may seem a bit self-congratulatory at having predicted Sally's bad end, at reporting unflinchingly the wages of sin, but she is also at times a benevolent instructor who laments her students' failure to heed admonishment to humility and duty. Bessy soliloquizes about the "useful lesson" (76) she has learned, "'Well! sure enough, that's a warning to me and every one like me! And when I think of how comfortable and happy that girl might be, if it wasn't her own fault!'" (226).

Bessy is impartial and single-minded in her obedience to God's teachings, and, as she walks the straight and narrow, she attempts to hold others on the same path. Sadlier identifies Bessy as one of the "Visible agents [who] are always employed to carry out the divine economy in regard to human affairs" (6). In fact, Bessy's example, although it fails Sally, influences Henry Herbert to seek morality and faith; Bessy's example is an agent in Henry's self-transformation. After Jim's attack, Sally manages to escort herself and her children back to their "*home*—i.e., a very, very small back room on the fourth story of a tenement-house" (226) where she succumbs to illness. The italicized "*home*" indicates the irony with which Sadlier uses the term. If only Sally had sought the refuge of the Church and her faith, she might have spared herself and her children from the bitter fate that Sadlier bestows on them with a rather callous sense of justice: "She [Sally] died in a state of

delirium, without priest or sacrament, and her two little children, deprived of their natural protectors, were, of course, adopted by those benevolent individuals who make merchandize of the souls of men" (228).

### **Reading the Discourse of Intemperance in *Bessy Conway***

Sally's demise echoes sensational temperance discourse, thus equating alcoholic and textile overconsumption as idolatrous. Catholic reformer Orestes A. Brownson, in a New Hampshire temperance address, defined the problem: "Intemperance is the immoderate indulgence of any of our propensities. It may attach to eating, to sleeping, to *our passion for dress*, or for society, as well as to drinking. The glutton is intemperate, as well as the drunkard."<sup>65</sup> Gluttony precipitates the miserable endings, somewhat luridly described, that await three of Bessy Conway's friends. *Bessy Conway's* scenes of the children orphaned and the families bankrupted and clothed in rags echo Washingtonian temperance narratives such as John Gough's *An Autobiography* (1845) or Thurlow Weed Brown's *Minnie Hermon, the Rumseller's Daughter; or, Woman in the Temperance Reform, A Tale for the Times* (1874).<sup>66</sup> Gough identifies the rum bottle as "almost [his] sole household deity,"<sup>67</sup> a parallel to what Sadlier identifies as "the *worship* of dress." Sally, too, places her faith in a false deity—a plaid silk dress that commemorates a point of her ruin. John Gough and the fictional Sally were not alone in their "worship." One source reports adult average alcohol consumption was 7.1 gallons in

<sup>65</sup> Brownson, "An Address," 3; emphasis added.

<sup>66</sup> See Blocker, *American Temperance Movements*; Rosenthal & Reynolds, "Introduction," 1-9. The Washingtonian movement relied on moral suasion and first-hand stories of alcoholism to urge abstinence.

<sup>67</sup> Gough, *An Autobiography*, 38.



1830 in the United States, up from 5.8 gallons in 1790,<sup>68</sup> and the *Tribune* reported that servants consumed as many as eight dresses per year from “slop dressmakers” at around two dollars a dress, “about a month’s wages.”<sup>69</sup>

Sadlier, in her novel *Old and New; or, Taste versus Fashion* (1862), establishes textile intemperance as the female counterpart to the “male” vice of alcoholic intemperance. Both broke apart homes and rendered their addicts heedless of duty. Sadlier reports a modiste’s impassioned denunciation of overconsumption:

‘[I]t’s [fashion] like a plague it’s got to be, and I tell you it ruins more families and makes more misery than *any* plague. What’s worst of all, it brings tens of thousands of poor unfortunate girls to destruction that might be virtuous and honest if it wasn’t for it. It does as much mischief as rum or gin—indeed, indeed it does!’<sup>70</sup>

The modiste’s exclamation yields key insight into the “environmental” effects of dress. Here, the modiste claims that otherwise “virtuous and honest” girls are ruined by textile intemperance. In other words, the girls’ dress choices do not exacerbate already faulty character but rather provide a negative influence. A poor dress choice can send a girl and her family into poverty and possibly temptation to theft; it can invite the attention of charming but licentious libertines. Much like Sally’s excessive skirt flounces and velvet bonnets—fashion as caricature of itself—the alcoholic’s swollen body represents the materiality of American society gorged on

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<sup>68</sup> Epstein, *The Politics*, 91; Rosenthal & Reynolds give an estimate of four gallons per year in 1830, perhaps including all ages (“Introduction,” 2).

<sup>69</sup> Stansell gives this statistic from the 1840s (*City of Women*, 164).

<sup>70</sup> Sadlier, *Old and New*, 88.

mass production; his body indicates consumption uncurbed by tenets of Catholic charity and asceticism. Sadlier describes the physical and moral decay of the once “Herculean” Ned Finigan, Bessy’s cousin and fellow immigrant:

Dull and heavy and stolid he sat there with that drunken gravity of countenance characteristic of the hardened, inveterate drunkard. [...] The fine, manly, athletic fellow, whose Herculean proportions excited the admiration of all who saw him had changed in those few short years into that cumbrous load of blubber—the hale, fresh, good-humored face was no longer what it had been—broad and coarse and covered with a sort of purple hue. (215)

Ned drinks the profits of his own business, while his wife Ally wastes away. The Finigans’ story echoes other temperance literature of the time: *Minnie Hermon* describes a rural tavern that unleashes “a thousand pernicious and evil influences”<sup>71</sup>: “Women, with countenances pale and furrowed with sorrow and care, and wrapped closely in scanty garb, were seen gliding gloomily through the streets; and children, their uncovered hands purple in the cold, and their little forms shrinking at every breath, and often bending under the burden of the jug, thus bearing to their own homes the cause of their own wretchedness and hunger.”<sup>72</sup> In *Bessy Conway*, Ned Finigan’s laziness causes him to enter business as a tavern-keeper, and his undisciplined use of liquor leads to his darkened, purplish complexion. These qualities paint him as the Irishman whose stereotype and whose behavior Sadlier hopes to quash.

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<sup>71</sup> Brown, *Minnie Hermon*, 129-130.

<sup>72</sup> Brown, *Minnie Hermon*, 133.

These descriptions—particularly in contrast to Bessy's own pale complexion—indicate the raced associations of vice and the nativist tensions that fueled them. Nativist (or anti-foreign) interests had a stake in demonizing the Irish-Catholic: portraying Irish features as dark, debased, and even Simian; and fanning fears of Catholic allegiance to foreign authority.<sup>73</sup> Sadlier and other Irish-Catholic activists were fighting ubiquitous caricatures of Irish as “greenhorns,” “bog-trotters,” and as one writer says, “alcoholic, shillelagh-wielding thugs or loquacious but ignorant fools.”<sup>74</sup> Ned, swollen and purple from alcoholism, and Mary and Sally, begrimed from consumption-induced poverty, fulfill these stereotypes; Bessy and others, bright-cheeked and pious, show the glory of Irish character and visage, untainted by urban vice. Sadlier hopes to inspire more “Bessies.”

Sadlier does not provide Ned with the means or inspiration to throw off the serpent of alcohol, but readers might have recalled Irish Catholic Father Theobald Mathew's triumphant 1850s American temperance tour which involved a signed pledge.<sup>75</sup> John Gough, in his *Autobiography*, describes signing such a pledge, and the act transforms his life. Richard Bushman, in *The Refinement of America* (1993), describes how the assumption of goods signaled the consumer's attempt to learn new practices and lifeways, particularly of the gentility.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Gough's signing of the pledge charts a new course of life. Alcoholism, which usually brought attendant poverty, was frequently associated with the rags, grime, or physical decay of a person who had given up care for his appearance and condition. John Gough

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<sup>73</sup> Eagan, “‘White,’ If ‘Not Quite,’” 66; Diner, *Erin's Daughters*, 117.

<sup>74</sup> McCaffrey, “Overview,” 218.

<sup>75</sup> Kelly, “Father Theobald Mathew.”

<sup>76</sup> Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 185.

commemorates his decision with a new suit of clothes. Gough's new suit symbolizes his new, temperate life, but it feels strange: "Now, I had been so long accustomed to my old garments, that they had become, as it were, a part and parcel of myself, and seemed to belong to me, and feel as natural as my skin did. My new suit was very fashionably cut, and as I put on the articles, one by one, I felt more awkwardness than I verily believe, I ever exhibited, before or since, in the course of my life."<sup>77</sup> Gough is still growing accustomed to the new lifestyle and discipline that the suit (as well as the pledge) imposes on him. Similarly, Gough's new suit of clothes, and in Sally's case, a fancy dress, declare intent to alter behavior.

### **Disputing "Sincerity" and Station through Textile Consumption**

Even Bessy's generally sensible and sympathetic former Irish neighbors and fellow emigrants succumb to the lure of dress. The Murphy family's two girls, Ally and Mary, adopt a style of dress far above their station. Bessy discovers Ally "in the full glory of artificial flowers, and ribbons, and lace, looking as consequential as that 'Woman of Three Cows' famed in Irish song" (91). This is the dress Ally assumes when her new husband, Ned Finigan, opens a liquor store and tavern in which Ally serves as hostess.

Ally's younger sister Mary takes work as a housemaid under a very sensible American-born, Protestant cook named Rebecca, or Becky. In a letter home soon after her arrival in New York, Bessy spends an entire page on Mary and her form of dress:

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<sup>77</sup> Gough, *An Autobiography*, 74.

' If you met [Mary] on the road you would'nt know her from Adam, for it's rattling in her silks she is of a Sunday when she goes out, and a beautiful bonnet and veil that Mrs. Herbert [the landlord's wife] herself might wear, and everything else to match that. [...] It kills Mary and Ally that they can't get "the old woman" (that's their mother) to dress up a bit too, but Bridget won't hear to them at all, at all, and you'd die laughing to see how they'll go to the other side of the street from her and Peery because the old woman goes out in her dowdy cap and blue cloth cloak. [...] [Mary] spends all she earns on foolish dress that only makes a show of her, and indeed she's not the only one here that does that, for I know plenty of girls from our own county that have been years and years earning good wages and have nothing to show for it but dress.' (135)

Bessy's epistolary diatribe condenses key arguments about textile intemperance. Most revealing is the way overdressing (dressing beyond one's means or station, according to convention) leads to pride, provokes family disharmony, attracts inappropriate attention, wastes money, and values chic over charity. As Bessy critiques Mary's textile consumption in her letter, she may as well be ticking off on her fingers Mary's sins: pride and "conceit" (one of the seven deadly sins); textile gluttony (another of the seven deadly sins); idolatry of finery (violation of the first commandment in the Decalogue); and shame and disrespect for her mother (violation of the fourth commandment to honor one's parents). Bessy's letter is part

of the disciplinary orality analyzed by critic Marjorie Howes.<sup>78</sup> Bessy sends a critique of Mary to her parents and siblings in Ireland, they presumably spread the news to neighbors, relatives, and their priest—any of whom might reap profit from such news—, and from there the critique proliferates, possibly even returning to America via another letter. Unfortunately, the girls' dispersal among sites of urban employment dilutes the previous potency of the Irish-Catholic instructional community of family, parishioners, and clergy. Mary grows “proud” from her “bit of finery” (135), and her “dandified” appearance masks a grimy and untidy person and room (164).<sup>79</sup> Mary marries a former rag man who dresses like a “swell” (183); she dies in penury.

Clothing theorist Marilyn Horn explains that the assumption of (here, exaggerated) middle-class dress without the accompanying behaviors of modesty (including casting down the eyes, staying at home of evenings, modulating the voice and temper, walking gracefully) and class (soft hands) presents an anomalous display that belies Sally's and Mary's true condition. Horn writes, “In other words, taking on the symbol without the accompanying patterns is revealing, and the inconsistencies that are detected between the clothing symbol and other characteristics of the stimulus person usually leave some doubt in the mind of the perceiver that the person is really what he pretends to be.”<sup>80</sup> The anonymous author of *Plain Talk and Friendly Advice to Domestics* (1855) scoffs,

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<sup>78</sup> Howes, “Discipline.”

<sup>79</sup> *Advice to Young Women on Going to Service* notes that “finery and slovenliness often go together” in servants (31).

<sup>80</sup> Horn, *The Second Skin*, 111.

A velvet basque, trimmed with honiton, and worn with a rich brocade skirt, may be very handsome for your mistress; but you must have the good sense to know that a cotton velvet, trimmed with cotton lace, and worn with a coarse thibet, or flimsy silk, can have no beauty, and must necessarily expose you as a fair mark for the mirth and witty jest of those who observe the imitation.<sup>81</sup>

Instead, the unnamed female author of the handbook recommends a “calico dress” and “a tidy sun bonnet” as the proper servant’s attire.<sup>82</sup> Calico, inexpensive printed cloth of plain-woven cotton construction, lacks the inherent value associated with rarer materials and fancier weaves.<sup>83</sup> In a type of metonymy, the garment material represents qualities valuable in a servant herself: plainness, serviceability, and affordability.

Certainly, such handbook writers—usually of the middle-classes—had a vested interest in keeping servants in their places. Not only did they retain good servant help, they also quashed egalitarian ambitions and maintained class distinctions by which “middle-class” was made exclusive and thereby more desirable. As Karen Halttunen has argued, dictates of proper dress to proper station were a perhaps paradoxical response to the danger of the “confidence man” and “painted woman” who manipulated appearance in order to achieve social mobility and thereby disrupt social hierarchies.<sup>84</sup> The growing textile and fashion industries created axes of garment meanings (including fabrics, styles, garment conditions in

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<sup>81</sup> *Plain Talk*, 144.

<sup>82</sup> *Plain Talk*, 143.

<sup>83</sup> Carmichael, Linton, and Price “Calico,” 60; Prown, “Mind in Matter,” 3.

<sup>84</sup> Halttunen, *Confidence Men*, xv, 31.

secondhand clothing)—all socially constructed and contingent. Anyone could study these axes, and those who would misrepresent themselves—or improve their condition—could adopt clothing not generally associated with their social identity. Thus, in a prank, a millionaire might roam the streets as a longshoreman, but, even worse, a disreputable sort might don garments that expressed taste or middle-class wealth—without possessing either material or immaterial quality. This fear of insincerity pervades the work of the Irish-Catholic and Anglo-Protestant authors represented in this chapter; insincerity threatened all classes and ethnic groups and their ability to form relationships. (On the other hand, most handbook writers seem confident in their ability to single out the cheap imitation of the expensive model; they can identify the maid slicked up in satins that surely depleted her annual savings, suggesting that perhaps the dangers of insincerity or overconsumption were not so serious as supposed.) Even as character was trumpeted as the true worth of a man or woman, dress was supposed to reveal this.<sup>85</sup>

A servant's sincerity of dress (likely expressed through calicoes) indicated her acceptance of her "allotted sphere" or station in life.<sup>86</sup> As seen in *Bessy Conway*, to dress in a manner inappropriate to one's profession indicated a rebellion against God's assigned work. In his 1860 manual, George Deshon counseled, "Study, then, simplicity and economy in your dress, for these things are suitable to your condition and station in life, and are pleasing to God. Avoid setting your heart on dress and fashion, for they will produce in your heart vanity and self-love, that

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<sup>85</sup> Halttunen, *Confidence Men*, 65

<sup>86</sup> "To every one a different part is assigned. The world asks only that each do his best in the allotted sphere" (Bugg, *The People of Our Parish*, 139).



destroy the love of God.”<sup>87</sup> So important are garments to religious condition, especially for “those who earn their own living,” that Deshon devotes three entire chapters to matters of dress: “Of Modesty in Dress,” “Advantages of Modesty in Dress,” and “Of Modesty in Dress—Continuation.”

In *Old and New; or, Taste versus Fashion* (1862), Sadlier shows how easily garments could be used to dupe a respectable family. Two Gallagher girls, Ellie and Mag, are initially smitten by two well-dressed dandies who enter the neighborhood. Mrs. Gallagher—led to believe by the men’s dress that they are men of good fortune, occupation, and character—fetes the men to secure their courtship of her daughters. But the Gallaghers’ neighbors (who have seen through the men’s ruses) laugh up their sleeves and finagle to deflate the men’s pretensions and Ellie and Mag’s gloating. The neighbors invite the Gallaghers to a local ice cream shop where the men are . . . waiters! The girls, saved from imprudent marriages, nevertheless ignore their education in garment insincerity. Ellie and Mag next travel to fashionable Saratoga to entice eligible beaus. There they meet Messrs. Winter and Frost, well-dressed gentlemen who claim to own neighboring plantations in South Carolina. The girls and their mother are snookered entirely. Ellie and Mag rush into marriage, beguiled by the men’s grand appearance. When Mr. Gallagher’s bank fails, the girls lose their marriage portions, and Winter and Frost reveal themselves as bankrupt imposters trawling for rich wives. They abandon Ellie and Mag posthaste.

This supposed insincerity, by which a person could disunite his actual character from its garment representation, threatened the security of understanding

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<sup>87</sup> Deshon, *Guide for Catholic Young Women*, 251.

among people. The Protestant suspicion of garments applied more generally to a suspicion of materiality. Thus, one way of establishing Protestant sincerity was to condemn the use of Catholic objects—crucifixes, icons, ceremonial garments—as idolatry. In fact, as Susan Griffin argues in her study, *Anti-Catholicism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (2004), “Protestantism’s legitimacy depends upon tracing its origins to, and differentiating itself from, Roman Catholicism.”<sup>88</sup> Daniel Rock, responding to this same argument in 1851, observes,

That the Catholic custom of venerating the relics of the saints should be censured by English Protestants, is inconsistent, or rather, inexplicable. An Englishman will manifest a devotion occasionally enthusiastic towards every memorial appertaining to the great and glorious personages of the olden times. Whenever he visits those places that have been signalized by their sufferings, ennobled by their virtues and achievements, or have served as their residence, he labours to discover and carry away with him a particle of something any how connected with their story.<sup>89</sup>

And so we find portraits of George Washington in Protestant homes and schools, or Coreggio’s Madonna in Warner’s unpublished last chapter of *The Wide, Wide World*.

Anthropologist and material culture theorist Webb Keane argues that “sincerity” is a derivative of Protestantism and a facet of modernity by which Protestants hoped to separate a person’s interior condition from his outward conditions or at least to permit the outward conditions to act such a transparent part

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<sup>88</sup> Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism*, 8.

<sup>89</sup> Rock, *Hierurgia*, 285.

as to emphasize merely the “sincere,” interior state (as in salvation by personal faith) as opposed to one’s exterior appearance (or the exercise of sacraments or “works”).<sup>90</sup> But he questions the success or desirability of this enterprise. His critique of the sometimes false separation of person and thing, or immaterial and material, or spiritual and physical permits us to review popular contempt for objects, even garments, as false material expression. Keane deconstructs this conception:

Clothing seems most superficial to those who take signs to be the clothing of immaterial meanings. Like clothing, in this view, the sign both reveals and conceals, and it serves to mediate relations between the self and others. These are the very grounds on which Thoreau and many other Protestants and modernists are suspicious of clothing and, often, of semiotic mediation altogether. In unmediated transparency they hope to discover unvarnished souls and naked truth.<sup>91</sup>

In a dialectic of objectification, Keane argues, garments are expressive and formative in a simultaneous and continuous process; therefore ever distinguishing or extricating the “real” person (e.g., Sadlier’s Sally) from her “insincere” dress is impossible. She is in a constant negotiation with and appropriation of the qualities she values in (or hopes to express through) the dress. Ultimately, sincerity seems to be a matter of intent.<sup>92</sup> In the novels of Mary Anne Sadlier, garments both effect and

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<sup>90</sup> Keane, “Sincerity.”

<sup>91</sup> Keane, “Signs Are Not the Garb,” 200-201. Latour’s work, as it exposes the unjustifiable “modern” desire to divide and “purify” various disciplines, also breaks down false binaries of modern and premodern, or subject and object, or, here, sincere and insincere (Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 1-12).

<sup>92</sup> Note also that intent is one of the necessary conditions of Catholic communion or confession, for example.

reflect character, as well as blur the distinction of person and thing into what theorist Bruno Latour calls a “hybrid.”<sup>93</sup>

In another of Sadlier’s novels, *Confessions of an Apostate*, the first-person narrator Simon Kerrigan associates his old Irish garments and his Catholic faith so closely that one stands in for the other. Indeed, this association shows how, in Catholicism, the material (garments) and the spiritual (faith) are not necessarily engaged in a dichotomy where one is primary and the other secondary. Simon recalls, “The corduroy breeches and Caroline hat, which had formed important items in my outfit, were long ago laid aside as unfit for the *pave* of Washington Street, and with them went by degrees many of the minor observances of religion, which, like them, I thought, were ‘too Irish’ for a polished state of society.”<sup>94</sup> He also shortens his name to the un-Irish “Kerr.” The casting off of the material garments along with the material practices of religion effectively cuts him off from Catholicism. Moreover, to Sadlier, his clothing choice represents a type of garment insincerity that denies his Irish Catholic heritage. A faith without the practices or “works” is no faith at all.

On the other hand, Simon Kerrigan’s mind cycles through visions—all associated with dress—of his humble and devout Irish mother. After she dies, she appears to him in a new guise, a brown Carmelite death-habit—where a garment thus reveals to Simon his mother’s spiritual condition.<sup>95</sup> The Carmelite death-habit is the sanctified, ritual garment Simon associates with his mother’s saintliness—a humility of Christian spirit earlier marked by her plain “drugget” gown. She becomes the intercessor for the repentant Simon; he returns to his old Irish home to pray over

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<sup>93</sup> Keane, “Sincerity,” 70.

<sup>94</sup> Sadlier, *Confessions*, 61.

<sup>95</sup> Sadlier, *Confessions*, 225.

her grave and to seek her aid in his redemption. To Sadlier then the character/garment divide is not an immaterial/material binary but a mutually evocative hybrid. The metonymy/identification of garments and faith is well established in the Bible which promises white garments for the spiritually clean, a popular image in the Shaker gift images described in Chapter Two.

In particular, garment rituals may effect the union of spiritual and material through performance, similar to the performance of the Shaker "cleansing gift" mentioned in chapter two, a performance that matches thought, word, and deed, and provides a material reminder of heavenly things. Catholic rituals (conventions of performance conducted and witnessed by those aware of their power<sup>96</sup>) use material objects to effect transformations within objects and within those who participate in the rituals. A Catholic catechism from the eighteenth century, for instance, dictates a "Prayer Whilst Dressing," slightly altered in Deshon's 1860 work. Irish Bishop O'Reilly (1690-1758) included the prayer in his catechism, one that Sadlier was likely to have used: "Prayer Whilst Dressing. O God clothe my soul with a nuptial robe of charity, and grant that I may wear it pure and undefiled before Thy judgment seat."<sup>97</sup> Deshon's guide proposes, "When you dress, say 'Clothe me with justice, with true virtues, that I may be pleasing in Thy sight.' Such practices are very good; they

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<sup>96</sup> Daniel de Coppet, in *Understanding Rituals*, writes, "Ritual is a formulaic spatiality carried out by groups of people who are conscious of its imperative or compulsory nature and who may or may not further inform this spatiality with spoken words" (18). The works of Victor Turner, Tom F. Driver, Ronald L. Grimes, Catherine Bell, and Roy A. Rappaport provide helpful studies of ritual. Catherine Bell's *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (1997) offers an excellent overview of ritual studies practitioners.

<sup>97</sup> Tynan, *Catholic Instruction*, facsimile page between 44 & 45, from 1897 Derry ed. of O'Reilly Catechism.

have a greater effect than they seem to have at the time, and prepare the soul for prayer."<sup>98</sup>

Rituals such as prayers construct difference.<sup>99</sup> Even Bessy Conway's plain calico dresses may be ennobled through prayer; the dresses then recall the prayerful moment of communion with God. Vestments, product and producing of ritual, help to maintain the visible hierarchy of the Church order, whether relating to the clergy or to garments in general.<sup>100</sup> One of the seven sacraments<sup>101</sup> of the Church, for instance, is the taking of "Holy Orders," by which lay members of the church become clergy. Priests' vestments, "splendid garments of an ancient fashion,"<sup>102</sup> are attributed properties denied secular, everyday garments; Sadlier would argue that vestments are suitably grand for the priest's elevated station and special deliverance of the celebration of Mass.<sup>103</sup> Vestments gain their unique qualities through their specialized use and the ritual in which they are put on. Reserved for holy use, they also call the priest to petition for grace in his ministry and the parishioner to attend to prayer.<sup>104</sup> The holy garments are agents in the process of religious education and salvation. The actual drawing on of the vestments is a ritualized act of worship, transforming the wearer. In *Hierurgia*, Daniel Rock describes the ceremonial:

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<sup>98</sup> Deshon, *Guide for Catholic Young Women*, 41.

<sup>99</sup> Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, ix, 164.

<sup>100</sup> De Coppet explains that ritual expresses "the hierarchy of values which orders them" ("Introduction," 9).

<sup>101</sup> The seven sacraments include Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Extreme Unction, Holy Orders, and Matrimony ("Moral Destitution," 4).

<sup>102</sup> Rock, *Hierurgia*, 417.

<sup>103</sup> Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, has an extensive discussion of sanctification.

<sup>104</sup> Rock, *Hierurgia*, 414, 417-419.

The Amice is a piece of fine linen, in the form of an oblong square. The priest rests it for a moment, like a veil, upon the crown of his head; and spreading it upon his shoulders, recites the following prayer:--

'Place upon my head, O lord, the helmet of salvation, that I may be enabled to repel all the fiery darts of the wicked one,'—remembering the exhortation of the apostle:--'Put you on the armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the deceits of the devil, and take unto you the helmet of salvation.' It is not without a mystic signification. The act of resting it for a moment on the head, as well as the prayer which the priest is directed to pronounce on assuming it, render it strikingly allusive to that helmet of salvation with which each Christian warrior should arm himself, to extinguish and repel the fiery darts of the wicked one.<sup>105</sup>

Rock's description of the ritual has striking performative similarities—even beyond the shared biblical references—to Shaker practices outlined in Chapter Two. Vestments inspire awe, "elevate and purify" the thoughts of worshipers and "rivet their attention."<sup>106</sup> Thus, the material garment may transform not only the wearer but the witness to their wearing.

### **Crusading for Home Preservation through Textile Temperance**

Sadlier's admonition against fancy dress critiques larger patterns of American consumption that propose consumer goods as spiritually fulfilling. Sadlier sees that

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<sup>105</sup> Rock, *Hierurgia*, 422-423.

<sup>106</sup> Rock, *Hierurgia*, 417.

homes and churches weigh in the balance, and she urges the curbing of textile consumption. Overspending on dress indicates a habitual profligacy, an inability to spend wisely, to budget, and to maintain the domestic economy. Handbook writers and moralizing novelists are quick to clarify that dress does not, out of danger of expense, have to be sackcloth but rather of plain but fashionable style, made up of durable materials at a price that spares the family budget from hardship or want.<sup>107</sup> Bessy Conway, an Irish Catholic exemplar and paragon of Catholic domesticity, owns only the modest garments with which her family and mistress have provided her (136). She keeps a “neat chintz calico” and a “dark shawl”; she wears brown merino (160). And she defends what she identifies as a modest Irish mode of working-class dress that emphasizes saving. She exclaims,

‘If a servant-girl went out in a silk dress, with feathers or flowers in her bonnet, she’d be made a show of before she’d get in, and as for the boys, why! there wouldn’t one of them look the side she’d be in—the rich farmer’s sons, even wouldn’t like to marry a girl that wore such finery, for the reason that they’d think she’d make a poor wife. No, no, Becky! the servant-girls in Ireland have more sense than be laying out all they earn on foolish clothes that would only make people laugh at them when they’d have them on.’ (162-163)

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<sup>107</sup> St. Frances of Rome: wears a coarse shift under her rich dresses of noblewoman:

“For the rest of her life she never wore any other gown than one of coarse green cloth. This would not have been right ordinarily, for we must generally dress according to our stations in life and avoid every singularity; but her holiness had become so well known that it was proper in her case, and only gave edification to all who saw her” (Deshon, *Guide for Catholic Young Women*, 244).



Indeed, Bessy's conservative clothes of dark colors and plain materials act as a sort of "shield against sin."<sup>108</sup> Clothes act as tokens or reminders of duty. Prudent dress indicates other associated qualities such as economy (versus profligacy), modesty (versus immodesty), or practicality (versus impracticality). Bessy's friend Becky concurs, "What prospect is it for a man earning a few dollars a week to marry a dressed-up doll of a girl without a cent in her pocket or anything better to begin housekeeping with than a couple of showy flare-up dresses, a bonnet to match, and a stylish sunshade?" (163). Such wastefulness renders women unable to manage a thrifty household, to sustain a family within a budget.

Inappropriate dress—devoting one's attention to dress, dressing beyond one's means, wearing imitative materials, exposing one's charms too freely—discourages marriage or, even worse, invites poor marriages to the detriment of the Irish community and American nation. George Deshon explains,

If her heart and soul are in dress, what kind of a husband will she be likely to get? I fear a very poor stick, as they say; some one as giddy-pated and thoughtless as herself; probably some dissipated young man, who is taken by mere outside show; for a more prudent and steady young man would think a good deal before he would make up his mind to take such a woman for a wife.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> In *Clothing Concepts*, Mary Lou Rosencranz quotes a Hasidic Jew who describes the effect of his clothing: "clothing serves as a barrier against assimilation with non-Jews and as a shield against sin. As one member of the Hasidic community says, 'With my appearance I cannot attend a theater or a movie or any other places where a religious Jew is not supposed to go. Thus, my beard and my sidelocks and my Hasidic clothing serve as a guard and shield from sin and obscenity'" (295).

<sup>109</sup> Deshon, *Guide for Catholic Young Women*, 250.

The flashily dressed young women (such as Sally) attract worthless young men (i.e., Jim) and end up as shabbily dressed mothers. The evil of overdressing is unbounded as children suffer for their parents' folly.

Garments are an emblem of a servant's personal ability in the realm of domestic economy. Her own personal garments (for which she has sole responsibility for care and purchase, excepting the use of uniforms) serve as a means to express her knowledge and esteem for domestic textiles. They also indicate her own ability to keep house if she does choose to spend her savings on her own cottage or to marry. One handbook author explains, "If you go to the house to offer your services, be certain your dress is plain and tidy, not wearing your holiday costume. The honesty of your face and general neatness of person will go far towards a sufficient recommendation."<sup>110</sup> The domestic serving in her middle-class employers' home is put in charge of the private textile goods—chintz furniture coverings, the carpets, coverlets and towels, various groupings of weekly garments for laundering. The domestic must value her employers' textile investments by handling the goods carefully and knowledgeably. She must know to separate the dark wash from the whites; she must know how to arrange the domestic furnishings in suitable ways.

The garment and textile knowledge of servants was no small matter. Catharine Beecher, the anonymous author of *Plain Talk*, and other authors (from varying religious backgrounds) of domestic handbooks offer careful instructions for the care of homes, textile furnishings, and garments. They even offer specific advice for domestics. But this advice is not merely for the proper performance of the

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<sup>110</sup> *Plain Talk*, 17.

domestics' tasks, it also prepares domestics for a future rise in class and condition. *Plain Talk's* author offers a myriad of anecdotes of servants "made good" who by dedicated service and prudent use of resources were able to marry or to set up housekeeping and to rise even to the middle-class.<sup>111</sup> The most capable servants, then, who might aspire to home ownership and even to participation in the middle class, must be educated to maintain their homes and continue the spread of textile appreciation and refinement, as in Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*.

### **Confronting Textile Infection: The Urban Environment**

Garments take on particular significance in the fictional setting of nineteenth-century New York City. The garment industry, secondhand clothing trade, and wool recycling businesses (including "ragpicking") became immigrant-associated trades that guided the domestic geography of the city—including the neighborhoods and wards in which these immigrants and trades centered, and the actual homes, boarding houses, and tenements in which these workers lived.<sup>112</sup> In *Bessy Conway*, Mary's husband, Luky Mulligan, is a ragpicker, a collector of rags too filthy or worn for the secondhand garment trade. Ragpickers provided their wares to factories which shredded the rags into their constituent fibers for spinning and weaving into wool shoddy, a short-fibered material not as durable as the original rags. Luky's

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<sup>111</sup> A character in *The People of Our Parish: Being Chronicle and Comment of Katharine Fitzgerald, Pew-Holder in the Church of St. Paul the Apostle* [1900] comments on the class mobility that women may achieve through "good manners" and its associated dress. Mrs. Driscoll tells her friends, "Good manners belong to a woman's training, no matter what her sphere. And in this country a girl's sphere is just as exalted as she can attain, either through marriage, or through her father's success in business" (Bugg, 203).

<sup>112</sup> Historian Robert Ernst explains that New York City became the hub of textile shipping and merchandising, even for Massachusetts-based textile firms; the city also became a center for the ready-made clothing market, which grew from a \$2.5 million enterprise in 1841 to one totaling over twenty million in 1853 (*Immigrant Life*, 16, 18.)

profession is so horrifying because rags were the conveyors of every sort of filth and disease (smallpox, influenza, lice)—so noxious as to eventually require nineteenth-century legislation.<sup>113</sup> Mary's marriage to Luky, who later turns soldier and abandons her, draws her into a lowly station.

Sadlier's use of New York City as a setting in *Bessy Conway; or, The Irish Girl in America* not only serves as a point of realism but as a crucible of textile configuration. First, of course, New York City was a major entry point for nineteenth-century European immigrants, including the Irish. The Castle Garden performance venue off Battery Park on the southern tip of Manhattan in 1855 became an immigrant reception station only to be succeeded by Ellis Island in 1894.<sup>114</sup> Immigrant aid societies and the Board of Commissioners of Emigration supervised the arrival, documentation, and dispersion of immigrants from this one point in New York.<sup>115</sup> New York served as a distribution center for textile imports and exports, including textiles from Massachusetts, whose industry I describe in chapter six.<sup>116</sup> Moreover, New York thrived on the various stages of the garment industry. Garment manufacturers, secondhand clothing tailors and dealers, and rag-pickers (who commerged in rags for paper and wool shoddy production) also made the city a hub of textile industry.<sup>117</sup> That New York would develop an identifiable "Garment District" and a "Rag-picker's Court"<sup>118</sup> indicates the primacy of textile garments to the city and its psyche. The city had ready goods for the textile intemperate.

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<sup>113</sup> LaRoche and McGowan, "4.2: 'Material Culture,'" 282.

<sup>114</sup> Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 31.

<sup>115</sup> Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 29, 33.

<sup>116</sup> Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 16.

<sup>117</sup> LaRoche & McGowan, "4.2: 'Material Culture,'" 276.

<sup>118</sup> Rag-picker's Court in Manhattan was located around "Mulberry Bend," or "off Mulberry Street near Chatham Square" (LaRoche & McGowan, "4.2: 'Material Culture,'" 282 and 282, note 3).

*Bessy Conway* originates in a context of mass production of textiles, rendering innumerable fabrics available to all income levels, as well as in the context of a garment industry. Irish working-class immigrant girls' interest in fine clothes may stem from the general unavailability of new and modish garments in Ireland, where a secondhand garment trade flourished, and from the expanding ready-made garment industry centered in New York City.<sup>119</sup> Estimates suggest that by 1860 the New York garment industry supplied "about 40 percent of the country's total output of clothing."<sup>120</sup>

The urban location, as Sadlier repeatedly declares, is not an easy place to raise a family, not an easy place in which to preserve one's "home virtues" (although Sadlier herself raised six children in New York City). Sadlier navigates the dangerous urban setting of *Bessy Conway* by identifying the location of each habitation in the novel. Her attention to the geography of the city may reflect her newfound confidence in her adopted city; she moved to New York in 1860, and *Bessy Conway* was published a year later. The details of the setting may also engage the trust of her New York readers, winning their confidence in her moralizing knowledge by a practical knowledge of the city. But she also uses street names as codes for the race, class, ethnic, and industrial affiliations located there. Bessy, for instance, first works for a middle-class Protestant widow in the Seventh Ward in New York City, on Madison Street (62). She later works for a Catholic physician's family on Monroe Street (167), one block over in the same ward. Other characters, who verge into dissipation and vice, establish links to the more northerly wards. Henry

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<sup>119</sup> Devlin, "Shrewd Irishmen," 171.

<sup>120</sup> Devlin, "Shrewd Irishmen," 173.

Herbert, for instance, takes up habitation around Forsythe and Eldridge (167) which span the Tenth and Eleventh Wards, a heavily German enclave known as *Kleindeutschland*.<sup>121</sup> It is not the fact that Henry is among Germans that spells his potential ruin but his distance from those who know him and would instruct him. Bessy's cousin Ned Finigan's tavern is bankrolled by an Irishman who establishes his home far north of the city limits, along the East River, far out of range of his former Irish comrades (173).<sup>122</sup> The dispersal of ethnic communities is counteracted by the human density afforded by subdivided tenement houses. The crowding and increasing subdivision of floors and rooms of tenements led to dangerous population density that overwhelmed water and sanitation arrangements. Ernst explains that in the southern seven wards of Manhattan—the address of most characters in *Bessy Conway*—“the gross density of population per acre climbed from 94.5 persons in 1820 to 163.5 in 1850, while the average block density increased from 157.5 to 272.5 in the same period.”<sup>123</sup>

Sadlier's fictional domestics, Bessy, Sally, and Mary, lack their own homes and “live in” with their middle-class, urban employers. In the city, they are exposed to the predatory dangers of the urban street. Bessy, for instance, is accosted by a man who “peep[s] under her bonnet with an impertinent stare” (86). She is thrown in the way of all sorts of temptations, infections, and dangers which she could possibly introduce into the middle-class home. Critic Betsy Klimasmith documents middle- and upper-class fears of the violation of the family home by working-class elements. In particular, “Even the ‘quarantine’ of home is no protection from the contagious

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<sup>121</sup> Shelley, *Greenwich Village Catholics*, 50.

<sup>122</sup> See Hodges, “Desirable Companions.”

<sup>123</sup> Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 49.

urban slum” to which domestics perhaps venture on their afternoons out.<sup>124</sup> Indeed, Sally brings her questionable beau right into the kitchen; Mary marries a ragman whose constant exposure to the disease-carrying rags makes her a potential carrier as well. In fact, the urban environment creates what Klimasmith identifies as “a new anti-home—a repository for fears of chaos, mingling, and all of the dark and lurid enterprises that could not bear scrutiny in the order and intimacy of idealized domesticity.”<sup>125</sup> Bessy Conway realizes that Mary, for instance, never would have shown an interest in Luky, the ragman, back home in Ireland. In the city, without the close instructional supervision of her family, she falls prey to his charms.

Sadlier’s voice grows increasingly strident against urban dangers in New York City and Boston, points of disembarkation for immigrants. Con O’Regan in the novel of the same name, for instance, shows the good Irish getting out of New York and to Dubuque, Iowa, before more of them are dragged under by gin, dance halls, and low-wage work where Irish suffer discrimination. Dubuque is, in critic Charles Fanning’s words, an “idealized Ireland” and a land of plenty, a thoroughly Irish-Catholic community where no mixed (i.e., Catholic and Protestant) marriages occur, where all children study under a priest’s tutelage, and they carry on as if in Ireland.<sup>126</sup> In fact, Sadlier was writing under inspiration of the 1856 Buffalo Convention which hoped to organize the relocation of urban Irish to the Midwest.<sup>127</sup>

With individual, physical home structures so unstable, Sadlier recommends the Church as home—the church and its schools, hospitals, orphanages, and

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<sup>124</sup> Klimasmith, *At Home in the City*, 91.

<sup>125</sup> Klimasmith, *At Home in the City*, 3.

<sup>126</sup> Fanning, *The Irish Voice*, 129.

<sup>127</sup> See Sadlier, *Con O’Regan*, iii, and Fanning, 127.

immigrant aid societies. Conventional single-family homes in Sadlier's novels are prone to loss: Bessy's home in Ireland is nearly lost in the financial disaster of the Famine; in *Old and New*, the middle-class Gallagher family suffers a bank failure that causes them to lose their house, and the Hacketts lose theirs in a fire started when a daughter falls asleep reading a novel.<sup>128</sup> Bessy Conway returns to Ireland seven years after her emigration only to discover that her family is about to be evicted from its cottage. Bailiffs are literally heaving private goods out the door for the family's failure to pay rent. Indeed, the ravages of the Great Famine have rendered the family destitute. Bessy's careful hoarding—her refusal to indulge in fancy dresses or nights out on the town—enables her to act as the “divine” agent in the redemption of the Conway family fortunes.

The Church, then, assumes the role of stable, defining home for its American parishioners, many of whom lived in what Sadlier, in *Con O'Regan*, describes as “holes and corners, wherever they can get a place to stick themselves and their

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<sup>128</sup> Coincidentally, Pope Pius IX was confronting the reality of temporal loss. He was himself driven from the Vatican in 1849 after one of his ministers was assassinated and a republican revolution swept Rome (Palmer & Colton, 482). A decade later, the papal state of Romagna defected, and other papal states excepting Rome joined the growing Italian unification that included almost all of modern-day Italy, from Piedmont, Lombardy, and Tuscany to Naples and Sicily. (Palmer & Colton, *A History of the Modern World*, 515-516). By 1861, King Victor Emmanuel II was made king of a unified Italy, a “Risorgimento,” or resurgence of Italian glory. Pope Pius IX was essentially divested of temporal power beyond the city of Rome and “chose to remain in lifelong seclusion in the Vatican” (Palmer & Colton, *A History of the Modern World*, 518). Palmer and Colton argue, “It is now widely agreed that with the loss of local temporal interests the spiritual hold of the papacy on Catholics throughout the world has been enhanced” (Palmer & Colton, *A History of the Modern World*, 600). When New York archbishop John Hughes delivered a sermon in 1860 asking parishioners to sign a petition, an “address of sympathy” in support of the Pope and his claims to the Papal States (“The Temporal Power,” 8), the *New York Times* printed his sermon on page 8 and provided a scathing commentary on page 4. The newspaper labeled Hughes's arguments “rigmarole” (“Archbishop Hughes,” 4) and questioned his loyalty to the United States. Hughes's staunch defense of Pope Pius IX's claims to temporal power signifies a trend in the Catholic Church toward ultramontanist (“unconditional acceptance of papal jurisdiction” [Palmer & Colton, *A History of the Modern World*, 600], such as indicated by the declaration of the Immaculate Conception of Mary or the assertion of papal infallibility in matters of faith and morals) and centralization of power.



families into," sometimes a dozen families to a house,<sup>129</sup> and sometimes "subterraneous" and dank.<sup>130</sup> Bessy Conway herself cries, "'there's more misery hid away up in garrets and down in cellars than anybody living knows'" (134). To Bessy's claim about the hidden misery, Sadlier appends a footnote, "If Bessy Conway were writing now she would have a different story to tell. The misery still exists—it cannot be otherwise in a city like New York, but the deserving poor have found active and devoted friends in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, now established in every part of the city" (134).

### **Establishing the Catholic Church as Home**

Sadlier, in a move wary of the fetishizing of the middle-class family home and in a stance protective of the working classes, asserts the Catholic Church and its churches as the true home for Catholics. The permanence of a Catholic cathedral provided a stable location to which people could return. Its building and clergy fostered parishioners' spirituality and moral well-being through performance of the ceremonies of Mass and confession. Catholic churches, moreover, fostered a domestic environmentalism intended to draw worshipers toward God. Architectural critic Michael S. Rose explains that Catholic churches obey a Church ecclesiology which promotes the Catholic faith.<sup>131</sup> The church façade invites passersby into "the maternal sanctuary" even as it "catechizes" aspects of the faith such as through

<sup>129</sup> Sadlier, *Con O'Regan*, 92.

<sup>130</sup> Sadlier, *Con O'Regan*, 292. Historian Robert Ernst writes, "The occupants of these basements led miserable lives as troglodytes amid darkness, dampness, and poor ventilation. Rain water leaked through cracks in the walls and floors and frequently flooded the cellars; refuse filtered down from the upper stories and mingled with the seepage from outdoor privies. From such an abode emerged the 'whitened and cadaverous countenance' of the cellar dweller" (Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 49).

<sup>131</sup> Rose, *Ugly as Sin*, 12.

religious carvings.<sup>132</sup> The interior of the church “teaches and evangelizes” through “devotional art.”<sup>133</sup> Rose writes that a visitor to a church “isn’t unaffected by the environment of sacred art. Statuary, stained-glass windows, side-aisle shrines, and other devotional art in the form of reliefs, mosaics, frescoes, or murals are all designed to raise our minds and spirits to God and to things eternal.”<sup>134</sup> These iconographic elements not only uplift but instruct. In particular, the verticality of the traditional Gothic structure invokes “the heavenly and eternal” by drawing people’s eyes and contemplation above the earth and toward God.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, I would add, the traditional organization of the church structure guides the performance of religious duties by designating a communion rail or by posting signs of the cross.

Mid-nineteenth-century American and British architects introduced the Gothic elements of church architecture into private family residences. A.J. Downing, in his *Architecture of Country Houses* (1850), borrowed the argument:

‘In the forms of the Gothic cathedral are embodied *the worshipping principle, the loving reverence for that which is highest, and the sentiment of Christian brotherhood*, or that perception of affiliation which is founded on recognizing in man goodness and truth, and reverencing them in him. This is expressed in the principal lines, which are all vertical [aspiring, tending upward] [sic on brackets].’<sup>136</sup>

Downing proposed single-family homes comprised of Gothic elements such as pointed, elongated windows; elevated, bracketed ceilings; and arched doorways, all

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<sup>132</sup> Rose, *Ugly as Sin*, 44.

<sup>133</sup> Rose, *Ugly as Sin*, 70.

<sup>134</sup> Rose, *Ugly as Sin*, 70.

<sup>135</sup> Rose, *Ugly as Sin*, 11.

<sup>136</sup> Downing, *Architecture of Country Houses*, 21.

reminiscent of church architecture.<sup>137</sup> Of course, this form of private architecture was a universal design, intended for families of varied religious backgrounds.

The home, with its Gothic elements, was intended to inspire spiritual contemplation and to invite family connections in the attractive rooms. Cultural historian Clifford Clark, Jr., explains, "By tying together housing standards and appropriate family behaviors, [architects and reformers] hoped to improve the nature of society itself and to contribute to the world advance toward civilization."<sup>138</sup> These homes, however, were possibly fetishes for religious aspiration. Theorist Emily Apter argues, "If anything, fetishism records the trajectory of an *idée fixe* or *noumen* in search of its materialist twin (god to idol, alienated labor to luxury item, phallus to shoe fetish and so on). Though the twin provides only an inferior reflection of the imaginary first form, its degraded simulation may be recuperated for politics: it speaks in the name of colonized, lesser gods. Moreover, fetishism's recursivity—its habit of playing representational *sosie* [double] to itself—also allows it to become a vehicle for resisting confining essentialisms."<sup>139</sup> The Gothic house is "an inferior reflection of the imagined first form," i.e., the cathedral, but in a move recalling Webb Keane, it also begins to recuperate Protestant desire for materiality also seen in the appropriation of Madonna images as representative of Protestant motherhood and true womanhood.<sup>140</sup>

Sadlier, although granting women the power of moral influence, relocates the family home in the Church. Sadlier describes the "filial" attachment of Irish

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<sup>137</sup> Downing, *Architecture of Country Houses*, 383-384.

<sup>138</sup> Clark, *The American Family Home*, 4.

<sup>139</sup> Apter, "Introduction," 4.

<sup>140</sup> See Morgan, *Protestants and Pictures*; Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism*, 5.

parishioners to their clergy.<sup>141</sup> The Catholic Church is the center of moral authority determined by the wise leadership of the Pope and the First Vatican Council, for instance, not by the individual conscience and grace of believers, as with the Protestant sects. If moral authority were to be found in the Church, exterior to the individual family home, then the community of the Church and its physical structures assumed the role of mother and home, similar to configurations of domesticity espoused in Protestant texts. This is not to say that the Catholic mother had no role to play as spiritual guide in the nuclear family; she did. But as Marjorie Howes points out, Sadlier, for one, rejects "the excessive privatization of moral authority" such as seen in Protestant interiority of conscience and salvation ("religion of the heart"<sup>142</sup>) as well as in such trends as "pluralism, secularism, individualism, and conscience."<sup>143</sup> Sadlier, instead, "focuses more on the extended family and Irish Catholic community than on the nuclear family or the autonomous individual."<sup>144</sup> She is concerned, as an author of didactic fiction, with "elevat[ing] the tone"<sup>145</sup> of the Irish Catholic community, with directing her readers' attention to the Church as the arbiter of social structures and mores.

Sadlier creates models of munificence toward the church. Bessy Conway and her fellow immigrant Paul Brannigan give their earnings from domestic service and cobbling to the church.<sup>146</sup> Con O'Regan and his sister Winny in *Con O'Regan*;

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<sup>141</sup> Sadlier, *The Blakes and the Flanagans*, 73.

<sup>142</sup> Howes, "Discipline," 156.

<sup>143</sup> Howes, "Discipline," 155.

<sup>144</sup> Howes, "Discipline," 158.

<sup>145</sup> McGuire, 185-186, qtd. in Szabo, "My Heart Bleeds," 3 of 12.

<sup>146</sup> In *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century*, Hasia Diner asserts women's generosity to the churches (138). Father Deshon, too, implicated female domestic servants in the upbuilding of the church:

or, *Emigrant Life in the New World* (1864) spend to the last farthing on the church knowing that God is not unmindful of sacrifice. Simon Kerrigan, the reformed apostate in *Confessions of an Apostate; or, Leaves from a Troubled Life* (1864), donates money for the construction of a Catholic church in New Haven, Connecticut—after his own Nativist son participates in the burning of a Catholic church, similar to an incident in Philadelphia where Nativists burned two churches and killed thirteen people.<sup>147</sup>

Contributions by Catholics, much from recent immigrants such as the Irish, Germans, and Italians, enabled the archdiocese to grow from twenty-four Catholic churches in 1855 to thirty-two in 1860.<sup>148</sup> Moreover, donations enabled these churches to install paintings and statuary and textile art such as altar coverings and tapestries that heightened parishioners' spiritual awareness. Historian Jay Dolan explains, "Large churches, like private mansions, were prestigious symbols";<sup>149</sup> these edifices strengthen church presence in the community and refine their parishioners with what Bessy admires as "the fine churches and the beautiful pictures, and everything that way" (134).<sup>150</sup> An old gentlewoman in *The People of Our Parish* (1900) muses,

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If you do not relieve the poor, you may, in imitation of St. Mary Magdalen, anoint our Lord's feet with precious ointment. How can this be done? By contributing to the erecting and beautifying of churches and altars. The girls who live out have been called the church-builders, and it is a glorious title for them. Out of their hard earnings they have done so much for the glory and honor of God and for the salvation of immortal souls that God will never forget it. (Deshon, *Guide for Catholic Young Women*, 249)

<sup>147</sup> Thorp, *Catholic Novelists*, 36.

<sup>148</sup> Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 271; Dolan, "A Critical Period."

<sup>149</sup> Dolan, "A Critical Period," 532.

<sup>150</sup> Sadlier's *Bessy Conway* cites an actual church, St. Joseph's on Sixth Avenue (123). Thomas Shelley gives a full history of this church in his book, *Greenwich Village Catholics*.

'And what is a Cathedral but a prayer in stone and an act of adoration? All that is beautiful in nature, all that is noblest in art are gathered and placed there in perpetual service of the Creator of all. When God sees the wickedness of the world and in His justice is tempted to send some retributive calamity on the nations, those beautiful churches, enshrining the Blessed Sacrament, lift up their spires as if pleading for mercy, pleading potently during all the long centuries. And those who contribute to them, if only a few cents saved from some little luxury denied, must feel a thrill of noble pride at the sight of the beautiful temple they have helped to erect or preserve. What a blessed privilege to contribute towards the splendor of the dwelling-place of the Most High!'<sup>151</sup>

Indeed, the archdiocese of New York not only boasted a large population of Catholics, it also managed to get them to church or at least to pledge money for its churches and institutions. At the very least, churches charged pew rents whose costs varied according to the desirability of the pew location.<sup>152</sup> For large capital improvements and debt reductions, parish priests had to organize large capital campaigns. The result was that, by 1860, New York's thirty Catholic churches had an assessed value of over a million and a half dollars. Historian Jay Dolan writes, "only the Presbyterians and the Episcopalians surpassed the Catholics in landed

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<sup>151</sup> Bugg, *The People of Our Parish*, 134.

<sup>152</sup> The historian of St. Joseph's Church in New York, Thomas J. Shelley, writes, "One unfortunate side effect of pew rents was to accentuate the class differences in the congregation. On Sundays at St. Joseph's Church the aisles were clogged with poor people standing throughout the Mass because they could not or would not rent one of the many vacant pews. The trustees urged them to attend the early morning Masses so that they did not block the aisles at the high Mass" (Shelley, *Greenwich Village Catholics*, 40).

wealth.”<sup>153</sup> The impressive stone St. Patrick’s Cathedral, dedicated in 1851 and seating fifteen hundred,<sup>154</sup> and the German Catholic church of Most Holy Redeemer (1851) represented the strength of the Catholic community in America.<sup>155</sup> Inside, Dolan explains, “Signs of new wealth appeared in parish churches as remodeling and refurnishing embellished the achievements of the past. Vestments from France and imported works of art appeared on the scene with greater frequency.”<sup>156</sup> Gone were plans for plain, wooden churches such as the Catholic Church in America first established in Protestant “cast-offs.”

One Catholic newspaper, the Boston *Pilot* explained that grand Catholic churches were a sign of Catholic sacrifice, that, to Catholics, they represented the subjection of individual right and desire to a common, Catholic good. As such, these churches represented the stability and power of the Church. The Boston *Pilot* author compared Catholicism to Protestantism to posit a reason for mid-century “moral destitution” in America’s cities:

The chief part of the cause is in Protestantism itself. That is

inadequate to the absolute wants of the religious nature of man. It is a

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<sup>153</sup> In 1860, the thirty Catholic churches were valued at \$1,505,600. Dolan, “A Critical Period,” 534. Of course, we should not overlook the refining, elevating presence of other church properties, such as owned by the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches, among many other houses of worship. Ann Douglas might suggest that these sites—and their male clergy—worked in conjunction with female congregants who aspired towards a “feminization of American culture,” a connivance of power to build a cult of domesticity.

<sup>154</sup> Shelley, *Greenwich Village Catholics*, 2.

<sup>155</sup> Dolan, “A Critical Period,” 534. A visiting Roman archbishop named Gaetano Bedini observed in 1853, the “most outstanding priest is the one that has built the most churches and begun the most institutions.” Historian Dolan explains, “Bedini believed that this emphasis could be traced to the American desire for demonstrative success. Large churches, like private mansions, were prestigious symbols. For an immigrant church in an alien culture, such monuments enhanced the image of the community as well as the reputation of the priest-builder. When a priest of the brick-and-mortar tradition died, the eulogy focused on his building accomplishments and he was remembered not only as a good and zealous priest, but also a man of excellent business habits” (Dolan, “A Critical Period,” 532-533).

<sup>156</sup> Dolan, “A Critical Period,” 534.

new thing, being only three hundred years old. It is not permanent: it changes every day; its ministers are constantly disagreeing among themselves on doctrinal points; it has a thousand shapes. It has no sacrifice: there is nothing in its cold temples to inspire awe, and to fill its people with dread and confidence.<sup>157</sup>

Rock, in *Hierurgia*, reasons,

If man were a disembodied spirit, like the angels, he might worship with his soul only; but he superadds a body to his mortal existence; as long, therefore, as his spirit is the tenant of an earthly tabernacle, and animates a portion of the visible creation; as long as his spirit receives the impress of its ideas, and acquires its notions through the medium of the senses, and explains its own sensation by their instrumentality; so long must the use of some exterior ceremonial be necessary, for man to exhibit a becoming religious reverence towards his Maker, who requires that all his creatures, both visible and invisible, should pay him the homage of their adoration.<sup>158</sup>

Rock suggests that ceremonies and their material complements (such as altar cloths and drapes, crucifixes, and artwork), draw the worshiper's mind toward religious contemplation and enable concentration; they also impress onlookers with a sense of the awesomeness of Christian redemption, and they instruct the illiterate.<sup>159</sup> He concludes, "by teaching man to abstract himself from the common usages of

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<sup>157</sup> "Moral Destitution in New York," 4.

<sup>158</sup> Rock, *Hierurgia*, 343.

<sup>159</sup> St. Augustine first differentiated between *dulia* (the veneration of saints or objects) and *latria* (adoration of God alone). *Dulia* is a practice of using material aids to assist worship, and it is encouraged by the Catholic Church.



ordinary life, they impart a becoming dignity to the minutest action which is performed in the service of Almighty God.”<sup>160</sup>

The church, then, served as the location of “refinement” through which parishioners could be made to feel a sensitivity for beautiful things. The prevailing nineteenth-century belief in nineteenth-century domestic environmentalism prevailed here too. While beauty and orderliness lifted the spirit and made residents aspire for these qualities, squalid conditions—including horrid smells, loud noises, disorder, neglect, and filth—propagated shiftlessness and laxity, moral and otherwise.

Catholic novelists place great emphasis on the ability of religious materials to enact spiritual change—even conversion to the Catholic faith. In Anna Hanson Dorsey’s *The Flemmings, A True Story* (1869), for instance, a book (Milner’s *End of Controversy*), a statue of the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus, and an illustration of the crucifixion become the agents of spiritual conversion for a rigidly Congregational family in Ossipee, New Hampshire. No ecstatic conversion occurs; rather, these objects (or perhaps, here, agents) evoke the sympathies and invite the contemplation and study necessary to convert to Catholicism. These objects, part of the domestic environment, work on the sensibilities of even the prideful Martha Flemming, the last holdout against conversion. She even witnesses the statue of the Virgin Mary—since embowered with vines and flowers by Martha’s daughter Eva—casting a protective aura around Eva when the heavy plaster ceiling collapses. After this miraculous act, Martha can hold out no longer against the power of Catholicism. Eva’s decoration of and worship at the shrine of the Virgin Mary makes the Flemmings’ home a religious site.

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<sup>160</sup> Rock, *Hierurgia*, 347.

But for Bessy Conway, who has no place to call home while she works in service, the church is her home. Fictional Bessy has famous real-life supporters, however. Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, in their chapter, "The Care of Servants" in *The New Housekeeper's Manual*<sup>161</sup> acknowledged the place of the church in the Catholic servant's "home" life:

In speaking of the office of the American mistress as being a missionary one, we are far from recommending any controversial interference with the religious faith of our servants. [...] The general purity of life and propriety of demeanor of so many thousands of undefended young girls cast yearly upon our shores, with *no home but their church*, and no shield but their religion, are a sufficient proof that this religion exerts an influence over them not to be lightly trifled with.<sup>162</sup>

With the Catholic church as the physical home whose environment must exalt and whose material objects guide spiritual transformation, other personal refinements of home and dress must be secondary concerns. At a time of rapid upbuilding of New York's and the nation's Catholic churches, the Church required capital donations for construction and interior decoration. Altars required particular linen cloths and napkins to honor the sacrament of communion; priests needed the textile robes indicative of office and seasons of worship; churches used other textile

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<sup>161</sup> The full title is *The New Housekeeper's Manual: embracing a new revised edition of The American Woman's Home; or, Principles of Domestic Science. Being a guide to economical, healthful, beautiful, and Christian Homes. Together with The Handy Cook-Book: A complete condensed guide to wholesome, economical, and delicious cooking. Giving nearly 500 choice and well-tested receipts.*

<sup>162</sup> Beecher & Stowe, *The New Housekeeper's Manual*, 332-333; emphasis added.

decoration as well as painting and sculpture to draw parishioners' sensibilities and minds to God and to demonstrate the might and stability of the Church. These textile usages far outweighed the individual's desire for more lavish dress. Individual consumption, pious or otherwise—diverted funds from their proper investment in the church home and in the preservation of the family home. Sadlier shows textiles—fancy garments in particular—as emblematic of this nineteenth-century intemperate overconsumption which threatens the home and family. Her protagonist instead eschews these garments and is the only character to regain her Irish home. Sadlier thus rewards refined but ascetic Irish-Catholic domesticity.

### **Conclusion**

Soon after Bessy saves the Conway cottage with a small portion of her saved wages, she sits spinning flax in the family's main room (294). Eager for tales, the neighbors fill the room and ask Bessy about America. "Well! I'm not over fond of giving advice," Bessy declares before doing so: Irish Catholic girls should stay in Ireland. In America, girls exchange their devotion to God for devotion to goods: "Dress and finery, and balls and dances is all the God they have *then*" (295), she says. Moreover, their ruin is sped by "fall[ing] in with Protestants and Jews, and everything that way" (295) in the urban, promiscuous setting. She concludes her calm excoriation of emigration with the story of a former neighbor, Ann McBride: "[S]he *is* married to a man in New York that's pretty well off—I think he's in the grocery business—she lives in a fine house and has very nice furniture and all that,

and dresses in the very height of fashion, but her husband is a Protestant—a sort of a one—and poor Ann is—nothing at all” (295-296).

In short, America offers every sort of threat to Irish Catholic domesticity. Textile markets and egalitarian discourse spur rampant textile intemperance. Such intemperance—the worship of dress—not only bankrupts homes and families but also usurps the worship of God. Godless, intemperate young women make immoral servants, wives, and mothers. In the urban setting of New York, women contend with squalor and class and religious mixing. The Church is the sole refuge.

After preparing servants to defend themselves against every sort of threat, Sadlier focuses on a character impervious to these threats. Bessy Conway retains her staunch faith, serves her employers faithfully, saves her Irish home, and avoids fancy dresses. Sadlier, through a secondary character, announces, “a good servant makes a *good* mistress” (202); Sadlier accordingly elevates Bessy through marriage to her upper-class, converted suitor Henry Herbert. She becomes the benevolent mistress of Ivy Lodge. She is not only the inspiration for Henry’s spiritual conversion, but she also provides a rejuvenative pattern of Irish Catholic domesticity supplanting the reign of Henry’s cruel English mother. Bessy and Henry will now share their charity with the entire Irish neighborhood. It seems, then, that Sadlier proposes an Irish Catholic domesticity founded on religious and textile virtue, a domesticity that, given time, will colonize even the English colonizers. Sadlier’s *Bessy Conway* provides a stark juxtaposition to Stoddard’s *The Morgesons* discussed in chapter five; Stoddard’s protagonist practices unapologetic, appetitive

textile overconsumption as a form of environmental control, a religion of the senses rather than the spirit.

## CHAPTER 5

### TEXTILES AND THE REFASHIONING OF WOMANHOOD IN ELIZABETH STODDARD'S *THE MORGESONS*

#### Introduction

Cassandra Morgeson of *The Morgesons* (1862) disrupts nineteenth-century domestic fiction with a violent tug of the dining room tablecloth. She reports, "I pulled off the cloth and all—the dishes crashed, of course—and sat down on the floor, picking out the remains for my repast."<sup>1</sup> Calmly, Cassandra forages among the markers of domesticity she has just destroyed.<sup>2</sup> Cassandra, however, is not Elizabeth Stoddard's battle cry of anti-domesticity. Cassandra herself is a voracious consumer of textiles with which to decorate her rooms and herself; she appreciates "beauty in order" (76); she even marries and settles at the conclusion of the novel. Cassandra, in fact, asserts domesticity on her own terms, even if that means squatting among the dishes she has a right to break and the maid she has a right to discipline. With a single swoop of the fabric, Cassandra refashions notions of nineteenth-century white middle-class domesticity.

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<sup>1</sup> Stoddard, *The Morgesons*, 215; hereafter cited in text.

<sup>2</sup> Another word of interpretation might be in order here. Cassandra's flash of anger scorches the occasionally impertinent and sullen maid Fanny and her choice to serve Cassandra with plain kitchen dishes versus the family's "good" china and glass. Cassandra coolly disregards female diplomacy between employer and employee; she acts with impunity, a full owner of all that she commands and destroys.

In her 1862 novel, Elizabeth Stoddard (1823-1902) dismantles the monolithic ideology of domesticity; her characters' uses of textiles expose the faulty basis of gendered, nurturing, and non-competitive associations of home space. In its depiction of a family always on the verge of fragmentation, the novel is perhaps proto-modernist.<sup>3</sup> The Morgesons' community is further atomized by the nomadic practices of "homeless" women; unmarried women circulate as guests from home to home in a competitive market of domestic space, each woman competing against the other for scarce space.

Stoddard's refashioning emerges after she exposes the unstable foundations of conventional domesticity. For instance, she describes females devoid of supposed propensities to nurture; she shows how religious piety may ravage the home; she reveals women's market-like competition for domestic space. Stoddard argues for a refashioned middle-class domesticity predicated on textile-inscribed personal territory and womanhood freed from social constructs such as organized religion, gendered spheres, and courtesy rituals. (In *The Morgesons*, male characters are as likely to guide the home's household routines as females.) Stoddard's model for a refashioned womanhood is Cassandra Morgeson, of whom one character concludes,

'I saw that, unlike most women, you understood your instincts; that you dared to define them, and were impious enough to follow them. You debased my ideal. You confused me, also, for I could never affirm that you were wrong; forcing me to consult abstractions, they gave a verdict in your favor, which almost unsexed you in my estimation. I must own

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<sup>3</sup> Hager, "Hunger for the Literal," 699.

that the man who is willing to marry you has more courage than I have.' (226)

Stoddard's Cassandra engages in a decidedly non-refining consumption of textiles which she deploys as a sometimes ironic language of self-representation. To Stoddard, textiles are not only markers of a participation in culture, they are also a means of subverting and refashioning the culture.

Stoddard's rampant imagery of domestic textiles shows how people personalize and claim space. Therefore, I rely on theorists of material culture and sociological space to analyze Stoddard's "play" with the home and family as social and material constructs. Sociologist Erving Goffman, material culture historians such as Katherine Grier, and literary critics such as Sandra Zagarell and James Matlack help me to argue that Stoddard's oddly effusive descriptions of sensual textile imagery construct an alternate pattern of domesticity and womanhood. In particular, Cassandra Morgeson's observations and choices of textiles enable her to situate her identity, to defend domestic territory (as from female rivals), and to make herself opaque to characterological scrutiny.<sup>4</sup> Cassandra's first-person narration is a near-dizzying account of calico and camlet, brocade and bombazine, of dresses and upholstery. In each room, she figuratively (and one time even literally) runs her hands over the fabrics and furniture.<sup>5</sup> In turn, Stoddard implicates textiles in the

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<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Buell and Sandra Zagarell write, "Stoddard portrays a rebellious, iconoclastic protagonist striving against nineteenth-century social and religious convention toward an autonomy at once sexual, spiritual, and economic" ("Biographical and Critical Introduction," xix). They remark on Stoddard's "unconventional definition of true womanhood" (xix). Anne-Marie Ford describes *The Morgesons* as "a rich and unnerving novel that refuses to embrace conventional models of femininity" ("Gothic Legacies," 44). I attempt to articulate the origins of this unconventional definition of womanhood.

<sup>5</sup> Cassandra describes an episode in which she gropes through a darkened house, "But a desire to look in the glass overcame me. I felt unacquainted with myself, and must see what my aspect



claiming of domestic space and of the self. I review scholarship that considers Stoddard's alternately voluble and laconic narrative style; I explore the mass production of myriad textiles; I analyze Cassandra's interpretation and production of textile expression. Ultimately, Cassandra's coincident proficiency with textile language and sensual appreciation present an alternate version of womanhood and domesticity, one emphasizing the performativity of female roles, one as changeable as slip covers and lambrequins.<sup>6</sup>

### **Biographical Overview**

Stoddard was fascinated by "the disjunction between representing female desire [as in *The Morgesons*] and adhering to the cultural codes which shaped such desire."<sup>7</sup> Her letters, in particular, convey a sense of her un-true womanly passionate tendencies and her consciously maverick literary style. Elizabeth Drew Barstow Stoddard seems to have loosely based *The Morgesons* on her own childhood and ancestry. Her husband, Richard Henry Stoddard, later denied the parallels: "It has been said that Cassandra, the leading character in her novel, 'The Morgesons,' was a portrayal of Mrs. Stoddard's early life. That is a mistake. While all her characters are correct to the life of New England, they were all the products of her own imagination and referred to no particular person's life."<sup>8</sup> His disclaimer, included in a *New York Times* obituary, may have been a last-ditch effort to defuse any ill-feeling that had arisen from Elizabeth's depictions or to reassert the powers of her literary creativity. She herself acknowledged in 1856 that her summertime

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indicated just then. I crept downstairs, to the dining-room, passed my hands over the sideboard, the mantel shelf, and took the round of the dinner-table, but found nothing to light my candle with" (185).

<sup>6</sup> A lambrequin is a narrow band of fabric used to cover the edge of a shelf or curtain rod.

<sup>7</sup> Zagarell, "Elizabeth Drew Barstow Stoddard," 42.

<sup>8</sup> "Death of Mrs. Stoddard," 9.

vacations in her hometown of Mattapoisett aroused enmity: "I am, in fact, looked upon as a vampire here; for sustenance I write about them, and ridicule them" (September 21, 1856).<sup>9</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne also recognized the autobiographical tendencies of the novel. In a January 1863 letter to Richard Stoddard, he sketched the lineage of a family in *The Morgesons*. In the novel, Cassandra's mother-in-law's (Mrs. Somers's) father, Desmond Pickersgill, is the fictional portrayal of Hawthorne's and Elizabeth Stoddard's mutual relation, Simon Forrester. Hawthorne writes, "Old Simon Forrester was brought to this country from Ireland by a progenitor of mine [Daniel Hathorne], whose beautiful daughter he afterwards married; so that those respectable individuals in the novel were my cousins."<sup>10</sup> Forrester was a "cunning and aggressive" privateer and alcoholic; he was the father-in-law of Elizabeth Stoddard's paternal uncle, Uncle Gideon Barstow, who serves as the model for the invalid, impotent Mr. Somers in *The Morgesons*.<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth's acerbic pen delineated her own family's eccentricities.

Elizabeth was born in 1823 in Mattapoisett, a town on Buzzard's Bay in southeastern Massachusetts. Mattapoisett, situated near New Bedford and on the mainland west from Martha's Vineyard, seems the likely location of the Morgesons' fictional hometown of Surrey from which the Morgesons establish their shipping

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<sup>9</sup> Matlack, "The *Alta California*'s Lady Correspondent," 290.

<sup>10</sup> Matlack, "Hawthorne and Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard," 295. A June 1862 letter from Sophia Hawthorne to Annie Fields reports, "Oh I return also 'The Morgesons.' Mrs Stoddard is not quite correct about the Somerses. Mr Hawthorne says his ancestor brought the first Simon Forrester from Ireland as a cabin boy servant to himself; but that he was very bright and handsome, and made an immense fortune, and then fell in love with his master's daughter, who was the most beautiful woman of her day. Of this marriage were many handsome children. Mrs Barstow being one. The only claim to position they had was from connection with the Hawthornes. They were no descendants of Earls. All these children, as well as their father, loved whiskey too well. One died of delirium tremens" (Hawthorne, Letter to Annie Fields).

<sup>11</sup> Matlack, "Hawthorne and Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard," 296, 297, 301; Giovani, "*I Believe I Shall Die an Impenetrable Secret*," 48.

enterprise. In fact, Elizabeth Drew Barstow Stoddard's mother was the daughter of a tailor; her father, Wilson Barstow, was a shipbuilder who went through three financial failures, a parentage identical to Cassandra's. Elizabeth was the second of nine children and the oldest surviving child of the Barstows.<sup>12</sup> She attended a seminary at Fairhaven and, later, Wheaton Female Seminary in Norton, Massachusetts, but she showed ""a great disinclination for study""<sup>13</sup> even though she was an avid reader,<sup>14</sup> selecting texts from the library of Mattapoisett's minister Dr. Thomas Robbins, the model for Cassandra's book provider, Dr. Snell.<sup>15</sup> Her mother died in 1849 when Elizabeth was in her mid-twenties (a loss similar in timing to that sustained by Cassandra Morgeson).<sup>16</sup> Soon after her father's second bankruptcy in October 1852,<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth married poet and critic Richard Henry Stoddard on December 6,<sup>18</sup> and the couple formed a mutually sustaining partnership of literary ambitions: a "union of hearts and labors."<sup>19</sup> Richard, or "Dick" as "Lizzie" familiarly called him, was a "competent hack"<sup>20</sup> and "literary jack-of-all-trades"<sup>21</sup> who ultimately could not sustain his family entirely through his writing. Contemporary critics assign his poetry to "a worn-out Romanticism which we now label the Genteel Tradition"<sup>22</sup>; Lawrence Buell and Sandra Zagarell describe him as "a penniless poet

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<sup>12</sup> Buell & Zagarell, "Biographical and Critical Introduction," xi.

<sup>13</sup> Giovani, *"I Believe I Shall Die an Impenetrable Secret,"* 23; see also Buell & Zagarell, "Biographical and Critical Introduction," xii; and Matlack, "Hawthorne and Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard," 279.

<sup>14</sup> Matlack, "Hawthorne and Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard," 279.

<sup>15</sup> Giovani, *"I Believe I Shall Die an Impenetrable Secret,"* 23; Buell & Zagarell, "Biographical and Critical Introduction," xiv.

<sup>16</sup> Matlack, "Hawthorne and Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard," 289.

<sup>17</sup> Giovani, *"I Believe I Shall Die an Impenetrable Secret,"* 29.

<sup>18</sup> Matlack, "Hawthorne and Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard," 279; "Death of Mrs. Stoddard," 9.

<sup>19</sup> Vedder, *American Writers of To-day*, 279.

<sup>20</sup> Matlack, "Hawthorne and Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard," 280.

<sup>21</sup> Buell & Zagarell, "Biographical and Critical Introduction," xiii.

<sup>22</sup> Matlack, "Hawthorne and Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard," 280.

in a puerile Keatsian mold he never outgrew."<sup>23</sup> Richard's contemporaries, however, were kinder in their assessment; Henry C. Vedder, in his 1895 *American Writers of To-day*, expressed a "hot indignation of soul that Pegasus should thus be put to the plough," writing "pot boilers" to earn a living.<sup>24</sup> In fact, to eke out a living, Richard assumed a berth as Inspector of Customs in New York; he took the post June 28, 1853, after helpful political maneuvering by Nathaniel Hawthorne through his presidential friend, Franklin Pierce. Richard held the post for seventeen years, through successive administrations, even assisting Herman Melville to a position.<sup>25</sup> Regardless of the quality of Richard's own literary legacy, he was certainly instrumental in fostering the writing career of his wife.<sup>26</sup>

From October 1854 to January 1858 she produced a bi-weekly, two-thousand-word column for San Francisco's daily newspaper, the *Alta California*.<sup>27</sup> Living in New York, Elizabeth sent dispatches (conveyed via steamers and trains) on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of each month; her essays were "personal-rhetorical," reflective essays rather than "newsletters,"<sup>28</sup> and a great platform for sharpening her eye for local detail.<sup>29</sup> Her column seems to have ended after her brother, Wilson Barstow the younger, returned from San Francisco to New York at the end of 1857.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, Richard and Elizabeth gathered about them a coterie of writers with whom they discussed ideas and with whom, most famously, Elizabeth often

<sup>23</sup> Buell & Zagarell, "Biographical and Critical Introduction," xiii.

<sup>24</sup> Vedder, *American Writers of To-day*, 280.

<sup>25</sup> Matlack, "Hawthorne and Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard," 282; Buell & Zagarell, "Biographical and Critical Introduction," xiv.

<sup>26</sup> Buell & Zagarell, "Biographical and Critical Introduction," xiv.

<sup>27</sup> Matlack, "Hawthorne and Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard," 284; Matlack, "The *Alta California's* Lady Correspondent," 285.

<sup>28</sup> Matlack, "The *Alta California's* Lady Correspondent," 286.

<sup>29</sup> See Buell & Zagarell, "Biographical and Critical Introduction," xv.

<sup>30</sup> Matlack, "The *Alta California's* Lady Correspondent," 302.

wrangled. The couple lived at 329 East Fifteenth Street in New York City for more than thirty years, during which time the couple hosted a literary salon contemporaneous with New York's Bohemian circle which met at Pfaff's tavern on the corner of Broadway and Bleecker streets.<sup>31</sup> The Stoddards' wide group of friends included Edmund Clarence Stedman, George Henry Boker, Thomas Buchanan Read, Fitz-James O'Brien, and Thomas Bailey Aldrich;<sup>32</sup> they also had acquaintance with Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, William Cullen Bryant, James Russell Lowell, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, William Dean Howells, and actor Edwin Booth.<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth also had frequent fallings-out with her friends such as Bayard Taylor and his wife, Margaret Sweat, and "writers Louise Chandler Moulton, Lilian Whiting, Julia Dorr and Elizabeth Akers Allen."<sup>34</sup> Biographer and critic James H. Matlack explains that Elizabeth Stoddard "never entirely lost the tough, gritty originality, the passion and hot temper, the candor and sexual explicitness and impatience with fools that earned her the epithet 'Pythoness' among the Stoddards' friends."<sup>35</sup> In fact, Elizabeth confessed to her friend Elizabeth Allen, "I cannot stand blarney, roundaboutness—as I have not many good qualities of disposition I feel sure of this, which as many a good member of my family have told me, makes me often hateful. My father once

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<sup>31</sup> Howells, "First Impressions," 62-74.

<sup>32</sup> Buell & Zagarell, "Biographical and Critical Introduction," xxi.

<sup>33</sup> Giovani, *I Believe I Shall Die an Impenetrable Secret*, 45, 46, 55, 57; Buell & Zagarell, "Biographical and Critical Introduction," xxi; "Death of Mrs. Stoddard," 9. Elizabeth confides in a letter to Lilian Whiting, "Edwin Booth & his young wife almost lived with us" (Letter to Miss Whiting, 25 June); biographer and critic James Matlack reports that Elizabeth conducted "a brief but intense affair" with him in the 1860s (Matlack, "The *Alta California's* Lady Correspondent," 283). Zagarell describes Stoddard's vague association with Edward Smith ("Elizabeth Drew Barstow Stoddard," 44). Buell and Zagarell argue, "The rumors may have been false, yet they are a fair index of her contempt for Victorian canons of proper female conduct" ("Biographical and Critical Introduction," xii).

<sup>34</sup> Giovani, *I Believe I Shall Die an Impenetrable Secret*, 41.

<sup>35</sup> Matlack, "Hawthorne and Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard," 280.

said he never saw any being with such a talent for the disagreeable."<sup>36</sup> Literary critics Lawrence Buell and Sandra Zagarell explain that the Stoddards "prided themselves on being absolutely candid about their friends' literary and personal faults—though they did not like to hear about their own."<sup>37</sup>

While alienating to her friends,<sup>38</sup> Stoddard's disposition to incivility—her "'talent for the disagreeable'"—also emboldened her literary endeavors. Stoddard broached taboo subjects such as female sexuality and unconventional (even "neurotic"<sup>39</sup>) domesticity in *The Morgesons*, for example; she wrote without apology and without condemnation of the behaviors she described. Her willingness to scorn opinion and to embrace sensuality<sup>40</sup> and indecorum, enabled a refreshingly honest literature that she contrasted with contemporary women's fiction:

'Why will writers, especially female writers, make their heroines so indifferent to good eating, so careless about taking cold, and so impervious to all the creature comforts? The absence of these treats compose their women, with an eternal preachment about self-denial, moral self-denial. Is goodness, then, incompatible with the enjoyment of the senses? In reading such books I am reminded of what I have thought my mission was: a crusade against Duty—not the duty that is revealed to every man and woman of us by the circumstances of daily life, but that which is cut and fashioned for us by minds totally ignorant

<sup>36</sup> Stoddard qtd. in Feldman, "'A Talent for the Disagreeable,'" 217.

<sup>37</sup> Buell & Zagarell, "Biographical and Critical Introduction," xiii.

<sup>38</sup> Buell & Zagarell, "Biographical and Critical Introduction," xiii, use the term "alienating."

<sup>39</sup> Weir, "*The Morgesons*: A Neglected Feminist Bildungsroman," 438.

<sup>40</sup> Weir, in "*The Morgesons*: A Neglected Feminist Bildungsroman," mentions in a note that Stoddard "possessed 'stronger passionate powers than most women'" and that she refused to excise sexual passages or overtones in *The Morgesons* (as suggested by James Russell Lowell): "Alas, I am coarse and literal by nature, what shall I do?" (Stoddard qtd. in Weir, 433, note 12).

of our idiosyncrasies and necessities. The world has long been in a polemical fog. I am afraid we shall never get into plain sailing (August 3, 1856).<sup>41</sup>

Stoddard's novel, *The Morgesons*, remedies the omissions she noted in popular fiction. Her protagonist Cassandra possesses an unabashed appetite for plenteous food, fine domestic textiles, and sensual experience; she accepts her "idiosyncrasies" and pursues them, eventually finding companions who share her passions.

Stoddard, too, found a staunch companion in her husband, Richard. She sometimes complained that Richard did not appreciate her genius, but observers compared their love (and nearly fifty-year marriage) to that of the Brownings: "There never has been a couple more in unison with each other than Richard and Elizabeth Stoddard."<sup>42</sup> Buell and Zagarell write frankly, "They seem to have been sustained by a feeling of kinship as true souls arrayed against an ungrateful, stupid world."<sup>43</sup> Their strong relationship must have sustained her during a spate of tragedy in the early 1860s. In December of 1861, immediately after signing her contract to publish *The Morgesons*, her six-year-old son Willy died of scarlet fever.<sup>44</sup> A second child, born in 1859, died unnamed at the East Thirteenth Street home of Bayard Taylor, a friend of the Stoddards.<sup>45</sup> Literary critic and biographer Regula Giovani notes that two of Elizabeth's brothers fought in the Civil War; Zaccheus was killed in October of 1862 after the June 1862 publication of *The Morgesons*, and Wilson was stricken ill

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<sup>41</sup> Matlack, "The *Alta California's* Lady Correspondent," 299.

<sup>42</sup> "Death of Mrs. Stoddard," 9.

<sup>43</sup> Buell & Zagarell, "Biographical and Critical Introduction," xiii.

<sup>44</sup> Matlack, "Hawthorne and Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard," 284; Giovani, "*I Believe*," 42.

<sup>45</sup> Giovani, "*I Believe*," 42; "Death of Mrs. Stoddard," 9.

in 1863 when Elizabeth brought him back to New York to recuperate.<sup>46</sup> Her brother Sam “died in California in May 1865.”<sup>47</sup>

The Stoddards’ third son, Lorimer-Edwin (1864-1901), however short-lived, brought to his parents much pride and pleasure. Lorimer inherited a decided artistic bent; he achieved success as an actor in New York and the eastern United States, he wrote a stage adaptation of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* as well as another play, *Napoleon Bonaparte*, and he produced paintings which hung in his parents’ New York home.<sup>48</sup> Stoddard proved the stereotypical stage mother in her high estimations of her son’s talents. In a letter to Lilian Whiting, Stoddard enlisted her aid in the promotion and appreciation of Lorimer:

Mr Stoddard and I are going to meet [our?] son Lorimer Stoddard who begins on the 23 [in Boston] to act in Bronson Howard’s comedy of “The Henrietta” in which he has acted all winter in NY.

All our papers except The Tribune have given him good notices—and now having blown the maternal trumpet, let me say if you can do anything to shunt him along—do it—

We shall expect to see you and if you have not already seen

Lorimer you must go with us to the theatre—for the play is excellent.<sup>49</sup>

Later, Elizabeth Stoddard described the family’s summer vacation in the Adirondacks, where “Lorimer was the life of the house, at every turn he was consulted and followed in the getting up of amusements.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Matlack, “Hawthorne and Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard,” 278; Giovani, “*I Believe I Shall Die an Impenetrable Secret*,” 42.

<sup>47</sup> Giovani, “*I Believe*,” 42.

<sup>48</sup> “Authors at Home,” BR412.

<sup>49</sup> Stoddard, Letter to Miss Whiting, 8 April.



Stoddard's fierce loyalty to, savage pride in, and protectiveness of her son Lorimer were likely the result of her earlier losses; more importantly, though, was the fact that Lorimer was her biological "publication." Recalling her 1864 work on the novel, *Two Men* (1865), Stoddard wrote humorously, "I began it, wrote about half and discovered that Master Lorimer was also being edited—I stopped till he was well underway in the arms of his wet nurse, and finished it."<sup>51</sup> Lorimer's artistic successes in some measure may have ameliorated Stoddard's frustration at the lack of enduring notice her novels received.

### **Situating *The Morgesons***

Stoddard began writing *The Morgesons* in mid-1860, probably around the same time that Sadlier was preparing her novel, *Bessy Conway*, for a January to June 1861 serialization in the *New York Tablet*. The coincidence of their origins heightens the contrast between the two protagonists, Bessy using her faith and preaching textile temperance to defend the domestic sphere and Cassandra challenging the foundations of home and faith through textile consumption. The two authors, even if they shared the same city, were miles apart in religious and social orientation.<sup>52</sup> *The Morgesons* charts a new domesticity reflective of the flat materiality, such as of the sea, that precludes social order harmonized by a loving or even retributive God. Stoddard's vision of this new domesticity must have compelled her because she writes, "I began *The Morgesons*, and everywhere I

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<sup>50</sup> Stoddard, Letter to Miss Whiting, 25 July.

<sup>51</sup> Stoddard, Letter to Miss Whiting, 25 June.

<sup>52</sup> Stoddard lived on East Fifteenth Street; Sadlier lived, around the same time, on East Broadway (Fanning, *The Irish Voice in America*, 115).

went, like Mary's lamb, my MS. was sure to go."<sup>53</sup> In November 1861, her commitment to the manuscript paid off with a contract for publication with Rudd and Carleton of New York, and the novel appeared in 1862.<sup>54</sup> She followed *The Morgesons* with two more novels, *Two Men* (1865) and *Temple House* (1867), in addition to her short prose and verse compositions.

The Stoddards' hopes for her novels' popular acclaim were dashed. Late in life, Elizabeth reportedly confessed to an effusive admirer, "My books were absolute failures. They were assailed by the critics. My publishers lost money. I couldn't go on ruining people,' with that touch of irony she was capable of using."<sup>55</sup> Indeed, a contemporaneous 1862 review of *The Morgesons* in *Godey's Lady's Book* would not have sent women running to the bookstores. "During our career as a critic we have perhaps never been more puzzled what to say of a book than we are with this," the review hesitantly begins. It praises her "careful observation and keen penetration" as well as her "finished and elegant style" (which makes me wonder if the reviewer read the novel; more on Stoddard's style later), but it warns, "Nevertheless we are not prepared to praise it unqualifiedly." The review delivers a rather righteous death-blow to the novel: "there is a morbid tone about it, which is apt to have an unhealthy effect upon the mind, to say nothing of the morals of the reader." The reviewer concludes with the palliative: "Mrs. Stoddard's next novel should be a better one."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Stoddard qtd. in Matlack, "Hawthorne and Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard," 284.

<sup>54</sup> Matlack, "Hawthorne and Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard," 278, 284.

<sup>55</sup> Humphreys, "Mrs. Stoddard's Novels," BR5.

<sup>56</sup> "The Morgesons. A Novel," 301. Buell and Zagarell note that Stoddard's friend George Boker praised her later novel, *Two Men*, for its increased "smoothness": "The little lady has advanced greatly in 'style' since her first novel" ("Biographical and Critical Introduction," xxi).

Henry James, in an unpublished review, criticized her work as “brutally crude,” with “violently unnatural” characters.<sup>57</sup>

Even if Stoddard's novels were popular failures, they nevertheless found a small but appreciative contemporary audience indignant at the obscurity of her work. George Ripley, reviewing *The Morgesons* in the *New York Tribune*, praised the narrative detail—“Every thing related to costume, language, and social habits is drawn with admirable fidelity”—but he also expressed an understanding of the novel's ebb and flow of narrative energy. He wrote, “The story will be read as a development of powerful, erratic, individual passion,—a somewhat bitter, perhaps not unwholesome commentary on life and society.”<sup>58</sup> The three novels' republication in 1888-1889 and again in 1901 evoked further murmurs from forward-thinking critics. An 1889 reviewer wrote of *The Morgesons*, “This romance, cherished by the few, will be lost on the majority of readers, and yet it is among one of the most remarkable of the works of American fiction.”<sup>59</sup>

*The Morgesons* traces its protagonist's growth from “possession” to “self-possession,” particularly as a being unashamed of desire, sexual or territorial. The first-person retrospective narrative is a type of bildungsroman<sup>60</sup> in which Cassandra grows from (clothing) conformist to iconoclast.<sup>61</sup> The novel, set in Massachusetts of

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<sup>57</sup> Weir, “*The Morgesons: A Neglected Feminist Bildungsroman*,” 428, note 2; James, “Elizabeth Stoddard,” 615.

<sup>58</sup> Matlack, “Hawthorne and Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard,” 286. In a letter to Lilian Whiting, however, Stoddard claimed that Ripley's “reviews of me were worthless—Of that dark under-current in the soul and head of man he was either ignorant of or he resolutely shut his eyes” (Letter to Miss Whiting, 20 June).

<sup>59</sup> “New Books,” 10.

<sup>60</sup> Weir, “*The Morgesons: A Neglected Feminist Bildungsroman*,” 427; Alaimo, “Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons*,” 29; Feldman, “A Talent for the Disagreeable,” 208; Baumgartner, “Intimate Reflections,” 185.

<sup>61</sup> Baumgartner, “Intimate Reflections,” 190.

the 1830s through 1850s,<sup>62</sup> situates Cassandra Morgeson in the midst of “flux.”<sup>63</sup> Her father’s and great-grandfather’s shipbuilding and merchant enterprises are giving way to new textile industries<sup>64</sup>; religious revivals eddy about her and her peers but fail to move them. Cassandra grows to womanhood amidst shifting economic and religious ground, and she must uncover new bases for her personal identity. Surprisingly, her gaze fixes most steadily on fabrics. A brief survey of the novel’s textile and garment imagery shows Cassandra’s almost photographic explicitness of textile detail—in startling contrast to terse, telegraphic dialogue. As a child, Cassandra notes dresses the Morgeson women wear to an afternoon tea: the yellow-starred red calico dress with scratchy buckram undersleeves, her mother’s dress of gray pongee, Veronica’s blue cambric (16-17). Cassandra describes dresses worn to memorable occasions: a “dark blue silk” dress with a “cinnamon-colored satin stripe” and short, puffed velvet sleeves, a lace tucker, and blue ribbon (90); a purple merino dress she vows never to wear again (107); a dress of “heavy white silk, with a blue satin stripe” (181). Critics Sybil Weir and Sabina Matter-Seibel postulate that Cassy’s textile interest reveals her sensual nature.<sup>65</sup> In addition, the fabrics memorialize key events that Cassandra traces in her growth to textile-expressed independence.

Indeed, successive spatial and textile experiences plot Cassandra’s path to self-realization. As a schoolgirl, she is sent from her home in Surrey to her mother’s

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<sup>62</sup> The novel’s setting is easy to date because of a mid-novel reference to Charles Dickens’s Boston visit which he commemorated in *American Notes for General Circulation*.

<sup>63</sup> Zagarell, “Strenuous Artistry,” 287.

<sup>64</sup> See Christopher Hager’s excellent article, “Hunger for the Literal: Writing and Industrial Change in Elizabeth Stoddard’s *The Morgesons*.”

<sup>65</sup> Weir, “The Morgesons: A Neglected Feminist Bildungsroman,” 433; Matter-Seibel, “Subverting the Sentimental,” 26.

girlhood home of Barmouth, there to be “tamed” by Grandfather Warren, a severe Puritan tailor to whom pain signals spiritual transcendence. When her schoolmates ostracize her for choosing a pink calico dress imitative of theirs (and later complete her downfall on the teeter-totter), Cassandra is temporarily abashed. She does not renounce the power of material goods to establish her place in the world in favor of spiritual reliance, however.

When she is nearly eighteen, a previously unknown cousin, Charles Morgeson, owner of a cotton textile mill, visits Surrey. He invites Cassandra to live with him and his wife Alice and to attend the seminary in his town of Rosville. Charles and Cassandra share an unconsummated passion communicated largely through shared appreciation of domestic material goods. Charles, who has selected the home’s furnishings, food, and flowers (and who spends five to six thousand dollars a year on the home’s maintenance), schools her aesthetic taste and expression via her clothes and hairstyle. After Charles is killed and Cassandra badly scarred in a carriage accident, Cassy returns again to Surrey. Once back at home, Cassandra analyzes her illicit love for Charles; she is both unremorseful and troubled—“are not my actions better than my thoughts?” (132)—and deploys her newfound sensory confidence in redecorating her room. Susan K. Harris observes that “readers are startled by a female protagonist who does not shy from intense emotional experiences and who is not afraid to evaluate them according to her own standards.” According to Harris, Cassandra moves away from religiously-

constructed morality yet fails to ground herself in a sense of ancestry or historicity; Cassandra therefore judges her actions by her own standards of feeling.<sup>66</sup>

Her next trip is to Belem (modeled on Salem, Massachusetts) where she visits her Rosville school friend, Ben Somers and his family. There she falls in love with Ben's black-haired older brother, Desmond, a Doppelgänger of Charles. Cassy eventually departs Belem, leaving Desmond to fight his alcoholism on his own; she refuses the role of ministering angel or true woman. Cassy returns home to discover her mother dead in a parlor chair. Cassy endures the (to her) empty, "unprofitable" gestures of mourning clothes, relatives' visits, and the funeral ceremony (211). Thereafter, she "reigns and serves" in the household, her duty and desire in turbulent battle. Later, her father marries Alice Morgeson, Charles's widow, and Cassy's sister Veronica marries Ben Somers. Ben and Desmond, both alcoholics, take different approaches to their condition. Ben leans on a deliberately oblivious Veronica to cure him and later dies of delirium tremens; Desmond spends two years in Spain, trying to break his addiction by himself. He succeeds and returns, gray-haired and worn, to marry Cassandra. Theirs is a marriage of passionate individuals.

The 1862 novel elicited no great outrage or shock at the heroine's unconventional desires, perhaps because Cassandra marries and settles; in fact, her dramatic encounters, the ominous atmospheres, and the rakish husband are evocative of the gothic tradition. Most critics grope for a textual comparison of *The Morgesons* to some other nineteenth-century novel. It is as if *The Morgesons* does something so entirely new in its whirling passages of description and silence, in its

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<sup>66</sup> Harris, "Stoddard's *The Morgesons*: A Contextual Evaluation," 11.

attitudes toward domestic womanhood, that critics must try to tie it to some other novel already labeled and classified. Comparisons to *Jane Eyre*<sup>67</sup> and *Wuthering Heights*<sup>68</sup>—with their gothic elements and Byronic heroes—as well as of Stoddard to Emily and Charlotte Brontë abound.<sup>69</sup> Certainly, Stoddard weaves together various literary elements of the bildungsroman, the gothic, and the domestic, for example. The resulting narrative fabric resists a readable pattern. Because it doesn't truly adhere to any prior tradition, its plot is unpredictable—a structural parallel to the sometimes jumpy laconic dialogue and exposition that form the novel. In fact, the book resists the “annihilation” through total comprehension I discuss later.

However, attention to textile descriptions, prevalent in *The Morgesons*, helps to clarify Stoddard's purposes. The descriptions provide a material contrast to the omissions and reticences that fray the novel as a whole. Domestic textiles—garments and furnishings—mark personal space in the novel and offer the possibility of refiguration to characters grounded in the material rather than the spiritual. Stoddard scrupulously describes domestic textiles and furnishings, as well as apparel: the “dark red velvet paper” of Charles Morgeson's parlor (69); the blue chintz and damask of Cassandra's redecorated room (136, 143); the “plain yellow chintz” of slip-covers, gray walls, and green carpet of Mrs. Hepburn's lizard-like summer room (189). On the other hand, Stoddard omits mention of the non-verbal cues that make meaning of cryptic scenes. Literary critic Dawn Henwood, for example, uses figurative language to articulate the odd gaps, silences, and possible unreliability of Stoddard's narrator. She suggests that “the text is like a play without

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<sup>67</sup> Ford, “Gothic Legacies,” 43.

<sup>68</sup> Harris, “Stoddard's *The Morgesons*: A Contextual Evaluation,” 16.

<sup>69</sup> Zagarell, “The Repossession of a Heritage,” 46-47.

stage directions" and that "[t]he conversational lacunae emphasize the inevitability of the alienation of one person from another."<sup>70</sup> Henwood points out the general facelessness of Stoddard's characters<sup>71</sup>; Stacy Alaimo notes "the abrupt, uncanny style."<sup>72</sup> Lawrence Buell and Sandra Zagarell in their introduction to *The Morgesons*, note Stoddard's "astringent, elliptical style" with its "explosion," "sudden transitions," and "disjunction" as "vintage Stoddard devices."<sup>73</sup>

Stoddard, moreover, does not override her first-person narrator to explain Cassandra's fascination with material goods; Stoddard leaves interpretation to the reader. Zagarell explains this reticence by noting that Stoddard considered her novel as a piece of art, not didacticism in the form practiced by Warner or Stowe<sup>74</sup>: "The artist should render ordinary life in ways which suggest that it has philosophical significance but do not specify what that significance might be, leaving each reader to determine what questions are raised and how to engage them."<sup>75</sup> Indeed, referring to *The Morgesons* in a private letter, Stoddard declared, "Is it possible that my mind is so turbid that I cannot see how obscure my characters are—that none of them know what they want, or mean, or do? I know when I wrote *The Morgesons*, I was in dead earnest, and so far as literary conscience goes I did my d—t—."<sup>76</sup> Cassandra's observations of the sensual detail of textiles substitute for a more explicit voice. They suggest the possibility of endless refashioning, an evasiveness of codification. Indeed, the very silences and omissions are part of Cassandra's

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<sup>70</sup> Henwood, "First-Person Storytelling," 57, 58.

<sup>71</sup> Henwood, "First-Person Storytelling," 51.

<sup>72</sup> Alaimo, "Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons*," 31.

<sup>73</sup> Buell & Zagarell, "Biographical and Critical Introduction," xi, xvi.

<sup>74</sup> Zagarell, "'Strenuous Artistry,'" 284.

<sup>75</sup> Zagarell, "'Strenuous Artistry,'" 285.

<sup>76</sup> Stoddard, Letter to Miss Whiting, 18 September.



sense of self-possession, the right to silence and complexity, the right not to be a domestic paragon, the self-assurance in one's identity although different from the schoolgirls who all dress alike in pink calico.

Cassandra Morgeson is a vibrant physical being, very much embodied. In no way does she resemble literary depictions of the ethereal, frail "true woman," seemingly bodiless and unimpassioned. She begins life all sensation (14). She savors the stiff, scratchy sleeves of her red dress; she covets pink French calico; she feels hunger and eats "largely" (56, 165). She identifies herself with the sea's "awful materiality" (143), and comes to recognize her own inexorable force of passion. She is vital, tingling with love of life to her finger ends (67). Cassy is therefore naturally drawn to the sensory impact and resilience of textile garments and furnishings. Their changeability from one year's dress fashion to another, "from coat to clip rug and from curtain to patchwork quilt,"<sup>77</sup> and their intimate presence in daily life make them productive of self-reflection and chains of associations. They frequently "'may come to be seen as extensions of the self.'"<sup>78</sup> These textiles offer Cassandra a changeability, a chameleon-like ability to refashion one's self. Fabrics enable Cassy to achieve self-possession through manipulation and misrepresentation within textile discourse.

### **Using Textile Inscription to Claim Domestic Space**

Cassandra's textile preoccupation originates in her recognition that they claim and demarcate personal territory and effect domesticity. Textiles are the texts (also

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<sup>77</sup> Attfield, *Wild Things*, 132.

<sup>78</sup> Russell Belk qtd. in Attfield, *Wild Things*, 135.

from Latin *texere*, “to weave”) with which occupants read and write domestic space. Cassandra the adult narrator recalls her observations as a ten-year-old; she wore a “linsey-woolsey frock” and cataloged the colors and textiles in her mother’s winter room (7, 6). Although she does not yet realize their symbolic value, she identifies the textiles as wisely as a merchant rolling the stuff between his fingers:

We were in mother’s winter room. She was in a low, chintz-covered chair; Aunt Merce sat by the window, in a straight-backed chair, that rocked querulously, and likewise covered with chintz of a red and yellow pattern. Before the lower half of the windows were curtains of red serge, which she rattled apart on their brass rods, whenever she heard a footstep, or the creak of a wheel in the road below. The walls were hung with white paper, through which ran thread-like stripes of green. A square of green and chocolate-colored English carpet covered the middle of the floor, and a row of straw chairs stood around it, on the bare, lead-colored boards. A huge bed, with a chintz top shaped like an elephant’s back, was in one corner, and a six-legged mahogany table in another. One side of the room where the fireplace was set was paneled in wood; its fire had burned down in the shining Franklin stove, and broken brands were standing upright. The charred backlog still smoldered, its sap hissed and bubbled at each end. (6)

Cassandra lingers over the various textures and colors, from the lustrous finish of the (cotton) chintz to the rougher twill weave wool of the serge,<sup>79</sup> and from the red and yellow to the green and chocolate mixed indiscriminately, inharmoniously in the

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<sup>79</sup> Carmichael, Linton, & Price, “Chintz,” 77, and “Serge,” 304-305.

room. Her senses reel at the material bombardment, and she describes the “oppressive atmosphere” of the room (6). Only later does Cassy realize the individuation possible through atmosphere, the defensive territoriality used by women to claim domestic space.

Mary Morgeson's material presence in her winter room figures her as a household force with territorial rights which cannot be revoked without struggle. Her winter room is located in the house she shares with her husband and children, Cassandra and Veronica, and her grandfather-in-law and his second wife. Mary's winter room, likely her first personally decorated space, becomes a haven, a bulwark against the outside world and domestic instability.<sup>80</sup> As prescribed by domestic environmentalists (described in chapter one), the textile-softened interior symbolizes a desire to buffer the space from outside intrusion, and, at this point early in the novel, Mary's desire to heighten “the ‘attractions of home.’”<sup>81</sup> Merish explains, “An expanding consumerism, and the new world of goods being brought into the home, played a central role in the sentimental recoding of the domestic sphere as the site of fulfilled desire.”<sup>82</sup> The irony is that stories of Mary's young womanhood (including a broken engagement) suggest that her desires have not been fulfilled but curbed by conventional domesticity of marriage and motherhood. Mary's winter room takes on resonance when we realize her need to claim space in her in-laws' home and to establish a soft environment that contrasts her childhood home in Barmouth, which

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<sup>80</sup> Artifactual historian Deborah Federhen (et al.) explains, “The conception of the home as a haven from the competitive and immoral business world resulted in an increasing desire to soften and cushion the interior with coverings for walls and floors” (*Accumulation and Display*, 15).

<sup>81</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 143.

<sup>82</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 142.

I'll discuss later. To claim a space, to mark it as uniquely occupied, produces subjectivity in the claimant.

What Cassandra calls "atmosphere" might be better understood through sociologist Erving Goffman's description of concentric personal territories that enable identity and smooth social relations.<sup>83</sup> While his studies focus on social relations of the mid-twentieth-century, they also provide a language to describe mid-nineteenth-century spatial dilemmas. Mary's winter room is her "personal space," one of Goffman's eight territories that preserve the integrity of the individual in society.<sup>84</sup> In Mary's own personal space, she creates (at least the illusion of) security of ownership and uses textile goods (and their sensory influence and affective associations) to practice various performances of self. Judy Attfield explains, "The particularity of understanding individuality must start from the ground in the context of everyday world as a social place, [...] and the observation of how people appropriate things to construct a sense of individuality."<sup>85</sup>

Three more sites in Goffman's continuum are of especial relevance to a consideration of spaces in *The Morgesons*: the sheath, possessional territory, and informational preserve. The sheath includes one's skin and garments; we have already seen in chapter four how garments may be used to discipline and violate the individual and to contest subjectivity. (In considering Frado's "race," we can also see how skin color can be used to differentiate spatial rights and public treatment.)

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<sup>83</sup> Goffman, sometimes criticized for his "scant regard for the niceties of scholarly ritual" and for his lack of "replicable method," nevertheless provides useful description and analysis of various social interactions and rituals. His own extensive use of setting and subject description makes his work especially appealing to "literary people" (Lemert, "'Goffman,'" xxi-xxii, x, xiv).

<sup>84</sup> Goffman's eight sites, in descending spatial order, include personal space, the stall, use space, the turn, the sheath, possessional territory, informational preserve, and conversational preserve (Goffman, "Status, Territory, and the Self," 46-51).

<sup>85</sup> Attfield, *Wild Things*, 136.

In *The Morgesons*, Cassandra's use of imitative garments, a ploy for entry into a peer group, nevertheless makes her a target for violation of her personal space. (Her peers also violate Goffman's "conversational preserve" by staging a cruel conversation beside Cassandra's desk, inviting her to overhear, even as one says, "I am not speaking to you" [40]. The girls' deliberate manipulation of the conversational preserve disrupts smooth social relations. Cassy throws her book at them in retaliation [41].) Possessional territory relates to personal effects such as handkerchiefs, books, and even children which are part of a person's orbit. The informational preserve is both material and immaterial: the prerogative of an individual to maintain private thoughts without "intrusive, nosy, untactful" questions; to keep private goods such as "the contents of pockets, purses, containers, letters, and the like, which the claimant can feel others have no right to ascertain"; or to retain private biographical or biological information.<sup>86</sup> All of these domains of Goffman's territory are necessary to subjectivity. In fact, the respect of these domains produces the modern society.<sup>87</sup>

Mary's winter room as well as other personal spaces provide a buffered territory in which a person may use textile furnishings and possessions to "mirror" the self. Stoddard employs recurrent mirror imagery—the parlor mirror over Charles's mantelpiece; Cassandra's full-length mirror she installs in her room; the tidal pool in which Cassandra studies herself. Literary critics have linked these

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<sup>86</sup> Goffman, "Status, Territory, and the Self," 50.

<sup>87</sup> "Whereas Goffman saw societies as aggregates of knowledgeable agents, functionalists have typically seen them as aggregates of well-socialized individuals who fulfill their 'status-roles'" (Manning, *Erving Goffman*, 95). Indeed, Cassandra declares her free will in defiance of Calvinist doctrines; she demonstrates that women need not play victims or "status-roles" in an ideology. She sees herself as a "knowledgeable agent" who can redefine, to some extent, gender roles.

mirror images to the “Miltonic myth of Eve’s awakening to consciousness when she recognizes her mirrored image”<sup>88</sup> or to psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s depiction of the developmental “mirror stage” in which “[t]he maternal visage serves as a ‘precursor’ of the mirror, for by looking there, a baby sees its image reflected back, an essential step in the development of self.”<sup>89</sup> Cassandra is repeatedly fascinated by her own image; Barbara Baumgartner suggests that Cassandra, because of the inchoate relationship with her mother whom she “never understood” (17), “never is able to visualize herself fully.”<sup>90</sup> Therefore, Cassandra’s attempts to visualize herself become an ongoing journey of discovery. Baumgartner explains that “that ‘for women, mirroring is not a stage but a continual, ever shifting process of self-realization.’”<sup>91</sup> Stoddard posits that this self-realization occurs through the textile inscription of space.

Stoddard’s critique of conventional domesticity continually returns to the competitive territoriality of domestic space. Mary Morgeson’s claim to domestic space and Cassandra’s later use of theatrical textile furnishings suggest that the home is actually a concentrated nexus of market-like competition and that the home should not be read as a fount of nurture and sincerity. The problem, of course, in Goffman’s descriptions, is that subordinate individuals do not always have access to these personal territories. In Stoddard’s fictional realm, characters compete for domestic space and defensively claim home territory when they find it. Cassandra later recalls a constant rotation of visitors to her Surrey home, including “[i]nfirmit old

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<sup>88</sup> Henwood, “First-Person Storytelling,” 53.

<sup>89</sup> Baumgartner, “Intimate Reflections,” 189. See also Ford, “Gothic Legacies,” esp. 53-56, for further discussion of mirror imagery as a gothic literary device.

<sup>90</sup> Baumgartner, “Intimate Reflections,” 189.

<sup>91</sup> Jenijoy La Belle qtd. in Baumgartner, “Intimate Reflections,” 191.

ladies, who were not related to us, but who had nowhere else to visit" (22) and "three cheerful old ladies" in particular, who "filled the part of chorus in the domestic drama" (61). Another "old lady" arrives with "all her clothes, and a large green parrot" (153), and she "quilted elaborate petticoats," "knit stockings," and "was useful" (154).

These women—contributing to the domestic economy in exchange for domicile—are a by-product of gendered spheres that deny them a role in the market economy and yet thrust them into competition for scarce domestic resources. Critic Lori Merish's use of geographical theorist Henri Lefebvre helps to explain Mary's need to personalize her winter room; Merish writes, "Lefebvre has characterized the appropriation of the social spaces of everyday life as a precondition for the political empowerment of subordinated social groups: 'Groups, classes, and fragments of classes are only constituted and recognized as "subjects" through generating (producing) a space.'"<sup>92</sup> Merish uses this concept in relation to African-American culture, but the idea is equally appropriate for speaking about women generally, particularly those domestic nomads in *The Morgesons*.

Stoddard anticipates the population imbalance apparent in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's 1871 novel, *The Silent Partner*, where the Civil War has decimated the male population and women must reconsider their domestic options. In *The Morgesons*, on the other hand, men are frequently engaged in occupations that take them far afield and preclude the establishment of homes. Stoddard depicts men shipping out on whaleships and merchant traders, as well as working on the wharves, fishing from the weir, and running businesses such as textile mills. Many die in the attempt—Cassandra casually reports, "Now and then a drowned man

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<sup>92</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 213.

floated in among the sedge" (8) and the Morgesons' own housekeeper Hepsey Curtis works because her ship-captain husband never returns from "furen parts" (15). Frequent economic downturns<sup>93</sup> drive men farther in pursuit of income (even to the California Gold Rush<sup>94</sup>), but men also enjoy a wider range of social and economic mobility that draws them beyond the limited sphere of women. Women, in turn, cycle among homes as domestic servants, as guests, or as mistresses, and they compete over unmarried men who are "excellent provider[s]" (15). They leave few material traces of their presence.

On the other hand, several times Cassandra is the agent of refashioning the textiles of a room, whether in redecorating her own room, dashing the tablecloth from the dining table, or in displacing Mrs. Somers's clothes with her own. Mrs. Somers's daughter Adelaide, for instance, sweeps out Mrs. Somers's old clothes and laces from the dresser that Cassandra will use during her visit; she "busied herself in throwing the contents of the drawers on the floor" (167). Thus, Cassandra's textiles usurp Mrs. Somers's in a move that anticipates their animosity and unspoken competition for Desmond. New replaces old. Cassandra, with her constant consumption and redecoration with textiles, represents a figure of change anathema to Mrs. Bellevue Pickersgill Somers. Cassandra redecorates her room in Surrey as she grows and changes; Mrs. Somers clings to a fading past. As Ben gives Cassy a tour of the Somerses' Belem house, he apologizes for the furnishings: "They were fine once, [...] but faded now. Mother never changes anything if she can help it. She is a terrible aristocrat, [...] fixed in the ideas imbedded in the Belem

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<sup>93</sup> In "*The Morgesons*, Aesthetic Predicaments," Ayşe Çelikkol reports, "As many as seventeen economic depressions intermittently suspended market expansion between 1790 and 1870" (31).

<sup>94</sup> Matlack, "*The Alta California's* Lady Correspondent," 288.



institutions, which only move backward. We laugh, though, at everybody's claims but our own" (167). Mrs. Somers represents the upper echelons of the New England caste system, and she sneers at Cassandra as a new-moneyed upstart (with "Co." for ancestors [34]) whom Desmond will ruin and abandon. Unlike Mrs. Hepburn who recognizes Cassandra as the scion of an old New England family and as the representative of an alternate womanhood, Mrs. Somers accords no historical merit to Cassandra. Cassandra can produce no family heirloom, "no portrait, nor curious chair, nor rusty weapon—no old Bible, nor drinking cup, nor remnant of brocade" (8). But even as Mrs. Somers tries to keep Cassandra in her place, Mrs. Somers is doomed to fail.<sup>95</sup> Her decor decays even as she tries to preserve it; her control over her family loosens when the youngest child dies.<sup>96</sup>

Cassandra's strong revulsion to Mrs. Somers's Belem house indicates the great rivalry between the women and their competing textile visions. Cassy is overwhelmed by the Victorian parlor: "It was a bewildering matter where to go; the room, vast and dark, was a complete litter of tables and sofas. The tables were loaded with lamps, books, and knick-knacks of every description; the sofas were strewn with English and French magazines, novels, and papers. I went to the window, while father perched on the music stool" (163). When Mr. Morgeson prepares to leave, he predicts to Cassandra, "'You will not stay long [...] there is something oppressive in this atmosphere'" (165). Even amidst the clutter and

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<sup>95</sup> In "Gothic Legacies: *Jane Eyre* in Elizabeth Stoddard's New England," Anne-Marie Ford explains, "[Mrs. Somers] is also trapped within her own body: having been married at fifteen, she is still producing children more than thirty years later" (46).

<sup>96</sup> The fortune is to be divided among her children when the youngest achieves the age of majority. In this way she keeps her children on leading-strings, tied to the allowance that Mr. Somers doles out from his sickbed.

abundant furniture, Cassandra feels “lonesome” (165). The competition within the domestic sphere that Stoddard exposes undermines the notion of conventional, white, middle-class domesticity. The home, itself subject to competition, is no “haven” from the market, and its influence is therefore suspect. As Amy Kaplan explains, “the feminized space of the home both infused and bolstered the public male arena of the market.”<sup>97</sup>

### **Chastening Womanhood**

Middle-class young women of the previous generation, such as Mary and Mercy Warren (Cassandra’s mother and aunt), show the bleak results of an earlier domestic ideology based in a stark Puritan aesthetic. This aesthetic produces a negative domestic environmentalism that fosters both rebellion and repression. Mary grows into middle-class motherhood lacking a sense of feminine nurture and inured to her own and others’ pain (156). Mary and Mercy have no stake in their parents’ austere home. Mercy is relegated to a room “under the roof” of the colonial era saltbox (46), and her dominion is limited. She has little ready money with which to furnish her room and to create “atmosphere.” Moreover, Cassandra explains, “The construction of chambers was so involved, I could not get out of one without going into another” (29). In contrast to nineteenth-century homes built with an attention to spatial divisions of public and private (such as articulated by Downing), the Warrens’ home is from an earlier era of mixed use rooms. There are no connecting halls or neutral spaces, and each room is an indefensible territory prone to trespass. The privacy afforded by more modern homes, such as the later home

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<sup>97</sup> Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” 183.

that Locke Morgeson builds in which Veronica and Cassandra have their own wing closed off by a glass door, is denied to young Mary and Mercy in Grandfather Warren's old home.

The home's interior is a stark expression of Puritan values which value faith over works, since appearances, to early Protestants, are "always deceptive."<sup>98</sup> The floors are unpainted (29), and the oak chairs have backs of "upright rods" which are Cassy's "nightly penance" (33). The parlor is quite bare in Victorian terms, with "[t]welve yellow chairs, a mahogany stand, a dark rag-carpet," a curio shelf of Pacific seashells and a whale's tooth, and a suspended ostrich's egg (33). Grandfather Warren's unchanged home and tailor shop (situated together in a pre-industrial, artisanal domestic model) are a testament to his commitment to the old ways of Massachusetts; he works as a tailor, making clothes the exact same way he always has, without regard to changing fashion (30), and he serves his church by opening his home for parishioners to eat lunch and to replenish their water. Mercy even bakes the unleavened communion bread. (Mercy's use of the leftovers in puddings for home use surely eliminates for Cassandra the mystery or magic of the ritual.) Indeed, Grandfather Warren does not bend to any adaptations of fashion or furnishing within his home; he is unmoved by "innovation" (28). His home is a stark environment with only one fitful fire of green wood to warm the place: "He scarcely concealed his contempt for the emollients of life, or for those who needed them" (28). Discomfort is chastening, he believes, and draws the mind toward God. Historian Richard Bushman explains that some Calvinists, for instance, saw gentility and its refinements in dress and luxury as anathema to virtues of work ethic and

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<sup>98</sup> Lears, "Beyond Veblen," 76.

spiritual growth.<sup>99</sup> Ironically, Grandfather Warren's domestic arrangements are as influential as those espoused by nineteenth-century architectural manual writers such as A.J. Downing. Clifford Clark, Jr. explains the contemporary belief that "the environment that surrounded the individual was a crucial force in shaping his personality."<sup>100</sup> Unfortunately, the domestic environmentalism that Grandfather Warren fosters is not entirely successful in nineteenth-century terms. His two sons rebel, running away to lead "a wild, merry life" (29), and his daughters Mary and Mercy harbor "self-torment[ing]" piety (17) that offers very little spiritual joy and leaves Mary devoid of nurture and sympathy. When Grandfather Warren dies, Mercy and Mary "wept bitterly" over their father (57).<sup>101</sup> They miss his iron-clad certainties and imperviousness to emotion, and they cling to the Puritan dogma and female subordination that he had instilled. The lifestyle that Grandfather Warren has dictated leads not to discovery but to resignation; when he is removed from their lives, they are left at a loss.

Mary Morgeson's religious upbringing leaves her utterly unprepared to nurture or guide her own daughters. Veronica comments astutely to Aunt Mercy, "I believe [...] that Grand'ther Warren nearly crushed you and mother, when girls of our age. Did you know that you had any wants then? or dare to dream anything beside that he laid down for you?" (64). Mary and Mercy do not answer but glance at each other. Indeed, Cassandra learns piecemeal from various sources about her

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<sup>99</sup> Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 193. Bushman looks to "material evidence of cultural aspiration" such as abundant furnishings and particulated uses of space as evidence of the "presence or absence" of gentility (398).

<sup>100</sup> Clark, *The American Family Home*, 22.

<sup>101</sup> Their sorrow for their erstwhile oppressor brings to mind Faulkner's insight in "A Rose for Emily": "we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will" (505). While (thankfully) Mercy and Mary do not cling to their father's body but bury it with expected ritual, they nevertheless cling to his lessons about the chastening of desire.

mother's own vibrant past, when Mary rode "the white colt bare-back round the big meadow, with her hair flying" out behind, and was in love with—possibly even engaged to—another man whose family broke off the match (49, 137). She compares Mary's earlier desires to her current repression. Cousin Alice Morgeson, on meeting Cassandra's mother says meaningfully, "the Puritans have much to answer for in your mother—" (153). Cassandra's mother, whose native tendencies have been obliterated by her Puritan upbringing, can offer no direction for Cassandra's talents and desires. Mrs. Morgeson seems to acknowledge that her family is not a coherent group but a loose constellation of individuals, each nearly incomprehensible to the other. Mrs. Morgeson has no special spiritual insight with which to guide her children. In fact, at the opening of the novel, she is reading a debate over baptism by sprinkling versus immersing, a hair-splitting argument that suggests the impracticality of her faith.

But Mary's vital propensities are now lacking, and Mercy dons "a mask before her father," suggesting that she conceals and subordinates her individuality around him (28). Much like Mercy, who "had no dreams, no enthusiasm. Her religion had leveled all needs and all aspirations" (26), Mary can offer no counsel to her daughter in pursuing her dreams. Cassandra demands of her mother, "Tell me [...] how to feel and act" (63), and partly in relation to the decision of whether or not to stay in Rosville with Charles and Alice Morgeson, "Say, mother, what shall I do?" (64). Cassandra is desperate for guidance in handling her desires, tapping her passion for life. Her mother Mary responds "in a mechanical voice," with half-hearted advice she herself had likely received: "read the Bible, and sew more" (63). And, sure

enough, when Cassandra chooses to travel to Rosville, to explore this odd connection to Charles Morgeson, her mother leaves her with a present. Cassandra discovers "a beautiful workbox, and in it was a small Bible with my name and hers written on the fly-leaf in large print-like, but tremulous letters" (73). To Stoddard, these are the opiates that have assisted Mary Morgeson in conquering her desires, in tamping her vague dissatisfactions with conventional domesticity. Cassandra puts them away and unpacks her trunk. Cassandra puts aside conventional duties, unlike Ellen, in *The Wide, Wide World*, whose workbox is a cherished reminder of obligations to domesticity, mother, and God.

Cassandra's rejection of the Bible and sewing box represents a rejection of conventional white, middle-class womanhood. The womanhood Cassandra seeks—divested of organized religion and critical of a woman's "sphere"—requires also a new type of domesticity. Cassandra's eventual enactment of domesticity embraces materiality and appetite as indicative of passion and acknowledges a male role in home formation. Cassandra even observes without censure Alice Morgeson's ownership and management of the textile mill after Charles's death. Cassandra's interest in a more liberatory domesticity arises from her observations of unwholesome compulsions.

Stoddard physically marks her characters who have repressed natural feelings and instincts or who have lost the predisposition to emotion necessary to family ties in sentimental domesticity. These characters engage in futile, non-productive motions such as hand-chafing or nervous compulsions that suppress appetite—non-consumptive acts that mimic consumption. Mercy, for instance,

chews cloves, flagroot, rice grains, or a small chip, and later snuff (5, 49). Her habit is an empty and unsatisfying imitation of eating. Even more significant, the flagroot she chews is a type of sedative, and most of the elements are imports, her only taste of foreign regions and exotic locales. Her chewing represents an action without sustenance, a perversion of the appetite, the repression of dreams and desires. Her knitting, at least, is productive labor, but her later activities of transferring embroideries from worn out materials to new ones (126) feel similarly pointless. One could read this as Yankee economy or her rejection of the supposed female pleasure of artistic handiwork, but she also loses the sense of original creation associated with embroidery. In another compulsion, hand chafing appears in the story.<sup>102</sup>

After Grandmother Warren's death, Grandfather Warren begins chafing his "small, well-shaped hands" so that "his long polished nails clicked together with a shelly noise, like that which beetles make flying against the ceiling" (28, 29). The futile, self-oriented gesture represents a further renunciation of the physical world and the people in it. Indeed, the empty hand gestures and unfulfilled appetites suggested by Grandfather Warren's hand chafing and Mercy's chip chewing are part of a disciplinary system of renunciation of immediate, material, physical happiness in favor of ennobling repression of desires. Stoddard's depictions, though, debar a single interpretation.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Matlack also notices the hand wringing, but he does not theorize its significance: "The hand chafing [of Grandfather Warren] serves as a compensatory symptom of great power and suggestiveness" ("Hawthorne and Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard," 292).

<sup>103</sup> Another character uses the gesture as an expression of tranquility, not a mind-numbing producer of it. The Morgesons' kitchen help Hepsey Curtis rubs "her fingers against her thumb—her habit when she was in a tranquil frame of mind" (25, 241). Her action mimics the way one gauges a textile, as Ellen does the merinos in *The Wide, Wide World*.

Cassandra has a general preoccupation with hands. She notes class in the “well-shaped hands” (28) of her grandfather and the “dingy, crumbled, needle-pricked fingers” (31) of Sally and Ruth, his seamstresses; she watches the transformation of her own hands from red and nail-chipped (36) to white. Hand imagery, which I will discuss further in chapter six, seems to critique the possibility of human connection. While chafing, hands are withdrawn from others, grasping at emptiness, but in extension they can also represent the grasping at life, the indulgence of the senses, and the joining of people. When Desmond returns to Cassandra after two years of slaying his demon of alcoholism, he refers to the quality of his hands, as if they represent his ability to form a lasting union. He exclaims, “But I have taken such pains with my hands for you! You said they were handsome; are they?” (250). Cassandra’s attention to hands signals her valuation of the material and literal over the ideal and spiritual.

### **Employing the Language of Textiles**

Cassandra’s family is interwoven in the textile industry, an industry implicated in refashioning domesticity, as I argue in chapter six. During the 1830s and 1840s setting of *The Morgesons*, textile mills offered working- and middle-class women a means of self-support that made possible a reconsideration of traditional roles of womanhood and domesticity. Her own Aunt Mercy is familiarly called “Merce.” This nickname suggests the process of mercerization, a process developed in 1844 by which cotton threads were given “strength and lustre and [...] affinity for dyes.”<sup>104</sup> Her father and great-grandfather are merchants plying the seas; her cousin Charles

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<sup>104</sup> “Mercerize.”



runs a cotton mill; her maternal grandfather is a tailor. Mrs. Bellevue Pickersgill Somers, Cassandra's distant relation and eventual mother-in-law, must acknowledge her ancestor a weaver (170).<sup>105</sup> In the novel, Charles Morgeson builds his Massachusetts cotton mill in a region without other mills, and he acts as owner and agent. He expands his operation, hires more employees, and makes "a great deal of money" (76). Cassandra learns about a thwarted romance between a male clerk and a factory girl in Charles Morgeson's cotton textile mill (81-82), and later tacitly admires Alice's management of the mills after Charles's death (125). Textiles offer opportunities to women through both production and consumption in the novel.

With this increase in domestic production of textiles, the merchant trader lost an aspect of his trade. Prominent shipping families looked to diversify; Francis Cabot Lowell invested in textile manufacturing. In fact, in *The Morgesons* the days of the great merchant trade seem to be over; new ways supersede old ones. While some of Stoddard's Belemites cling to wealth from colonial trade, they are a dying breed. Adelaide Somers informs Cassandra, "the race of millionaires is decaying" (174). Cassandra's father dodges insolvency for five years before he finally goes bankrupt; the sinking of his ship, the *Locke Morgeson* in the Indian Ocean, symbolizes the end of an era (112).<sup>106</sup> No longer does the United States need to trade in India for calicoes and chintzes. New England mills produce these. Even trade routes seem to be circumscribed and abridged. Ben Somers, for instance, who promises to bring Cassandra a souvenir from India on "a favorite journey with

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<sup>105</sup> Weir, "The Morgesons: A Neglected Feminist Bildungsroman," 435.

<sup>106</sup> The novel's appearance in 1862 also raises the issue of trade circumscribed by the Civil War during which time Northern ships blockaded Southern ports, preventing Southern cotton from reaching mills. Moreover, Buell and Zagarell point out that Stoddard's own father, a shipbuilder, experienced "several bankruptcies" ("Biographical and Critical Introduction," xi).

the Belemites,” does not have to travel that far (152). He explains, “I went as far as Cape Horn only, but I bought you the idol and lots of things I promised from a passing ship” (155). The idols he brings to Cassandra will soon join on the shelf other artifacts of a past, glorious imperial trade such as Grandfather Warren’s “Pacific seashells” and “ostrich’s egg” (33). The excitement of the exotic seems to have faded; domestically produced goods are the future of consumption. Imported items are shelved, relics of a fading time.

Textiles, in the industrial age (continuing today), are produced at a much faster rate than their “dilapidation” would require; demand, then, relies on changing textile fashions and possibilities of display.<sup>107</sup> The mass production of goods “did not popularize the traditional ethic of self-sacrifice and saving; instead, the cry went out to bring down the cost of basic goods, and as costs went down more goods became ‘necessary’ to buy.”<sup>108</sup> Textile garments and furnishings allow consumers to stage “idealized” lives; decoration (and redecoration), in fact, is a “process of cleansing.”<sup>109</sup> Textile use became part of the articulation of self. Fashion theorist Alison Lurie explains, “To choose clothes, either in a store or at home, is to define and describe ourselves”<sup>110</sup>; textiles, with their versatility and mutability may also “define and describe.”

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<sup>107</sup> Barthes, “Foreword,” xi.

<sup>108</sup> Bronner, “Reading Consumer Culture,” 25.

<sup>109</sup> Clarke, “The Aesthetics of Social Aspiration,” 28, 26. Clarke explains that “‘moving in’ to a home frequently warrants decorating as part of the process of cleansing the property of its previous owners’ presence” (26), and I argue that this extends to nineteenth-century women’s claiming of personal space, also. “Ideal” homes (and, as I argue, furnishings), “offer an idealized notion of ‘quality of life’ and an idealized form of sociality,” writes Clarke (28). Poet G.K. Chesterton writes, “But the truth is the home is the only place of liberty, / the only spot on earth where a man can alter arrangement suddenly, / make an experiment or indulge in a whim” (Chesterton qtd. in Garvey, “Organized Disorder,” 47).

<sup>110</sup> Lurie, *The Language of Clothes*, 5.

Factories produced every fabric imaginable. Consumers could choose domestically-produced textiles to suit their tastes, budgets, and architecture. The rise of domestic textiles corresponded with a rise of specialized goods after mid-nineteenth-century that catered to middle- and upper-class households.<sup>111</sup> These goods “would ‘civilize’ and ‘socialize’ persons and awaken ‘higher sentiments’” by promoting universalizing standards of cleanliness, style, and value, for example.<sup>112</sup> Increasing varieties of domestic fabrics give Cassandra a wide discursive field.

Cassandra eats prodigiously and consumes textiles too, and her appetite seems well-matched with a burgeoning and vital textile industry. When Cassandra shops in Boston on her way to Rosville and Charles and Alice Morgeson, she buys “six wide, embroidered belts, a gilt buckle, a variety of ribbons, and a dozen yards of lace” (66). She says, possibly with chagrin, “I repented the whole before I got back; for I saw other articles I wanted more” (66). Every fabric and object imaginable is at her fingertips in this city. Consumption to Cassandra is an act of control and ownership. When she claims, “Even the sea might be mine,” she signals her insatiable appetite to consume, to own, and to control—to exert an aggressive womanhood (129).

Not only does she buy textiles for new furnishings or apparel, she also drinks them in as she sees them in others’ raiments. Cassandra reads people by their choice of textiles: In Boston Cassandra meets a missionary headed to India with his obnoxious children. Appropriately he wears camlet, an imitation camel-hair cloth, his

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<sup>111</sup> Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 2.

<sup>112</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 90.

very own hair-shirt.<sup>113</sup> She begins to read and interpret textiles. She attempts to learn their powers of communication and concealment. Indeed, in *Culture and Comfort* (1988), Katherine Grier argues, "The expanding universe of available consumer goods was like the universe of words available in a language."<sup>114</sup> Just as homespun had once expressed colonial self-sufficiency, a velvet or brocade conveyed "wealth and power because their production was so labor and skill intensive" and because the raw materials were "scarce and expensive."<sup>115</sup> Thus, different textiles evoke different associations and emotions, a matrix of "a shared conception of the product's symbolic meaning."<sup>116</sup>

Cassandra discovers, however, that she must exercise originality and care when using the language of textiles. Her first textile expression is a pink calico dress made popular by the schoolgirls in Barmouth. She wants to be accepted by the catty schoolgirls of Barmouth (39). She feels a new sense of power in her dress of imported material: "When I put it on I thought I looked better than I ever had before, and went into school triumphantly with it" (40). Cassy's peers circulate a note designed to shun and shame her. "Girls, don't let's wear our pink calicoes again," Charlotte Alden writes (40). Cassandra, self-confessedly "uncouth, ignorant, and without tact" in comparison to the "trained, intelligent, and adroit" Barmouth girls, fights back (35). She heaves her geology book at Elmira Sawyer's head, and Elmira's "comb was broken by my geological systems" (41). Fashion theorists

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<sup>113</sup> Camlet, "[o]riginally a fine expensive fabric made of camel hair and silk" came to be understood as cloth "made in imitation of camel hair cloth, being more or less hairy on the surface, and having a veined or wavy appearance" (Carmichael, Linton, & Price, "Camlet," 62).

<sup>114</sup> Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 12.

<sup>115</sup> Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 15.

<sup>116</sup> Hirschman, "Comprehending Symbolic Consumption," 5.

explain that conformity of dress, particularly among school-aged children, both socializes group relations and serves as “a protective badge.”<sup>117</sup> In fact, “The imitation of clothing behavior is a direct and tangible means of identifying oneself with a model person or referent group; this not only facilitates the learning of new social roles, but becomes an important process in the formation of the concept of self.”<sup>118</sup> But in this instance, Cassandra’s sense of self is negatively enforced: she discovers that, in an “economy of scarcity,” the dress as “sign loses its meaning.”<sup>119</sup> Frustrated by not fitting in, Cassandra learns the valuable lesson of individuality of expression. Moreover, the episode reveals the gaps in an ideology of “pious consumption.” According to Lori Merish, pious consumption is the cumulation of goods which could refine and “acculturate.”<sup>120</sup> The girls who battle over the right to wear pink calico are certainly not refined, but they do use goods as a means of culture-formation by *exclusion*. The French calico fails Cassandra, but her desire to fight back shows the dawning recognition of where her power lies—in her own choice and non-pious consumption of textiles.

### **Individuating Textile Expression**

Cassandra’s power lies not in imitation of other’s textiles but in her own choice of goods, a choice grounded in who she is—a Warren forged in Barmouth’s granite, a Morgeson raised at the edge of Surrey’s sea—and who she wants to be. Cassandra’s ill-considered decision to clothe herself in pink calico because the other

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<sup>117</sup> Rosencranz, *Clothing Concepts*, 104.

<sup>118</sup> Horn, *The Second Skin*, 95.

<sup>119</sup> Çelikkol, “*The Morgesons*, Aesthetic Predicaments,” 40.

<sup>120</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 90, 92.

girls do shows that she has not learned the power of textiles in her self-definition. Katherine Grier, talking about parlor furniture and upholstery, explains, "even if it is often an inarticulate process, the act of choosing always makes a statement about one's personal and cultural values."<sup>121</sup> The same would be true for the textiles by which we present our own domestic spaces. Cassandra's knowledge of textiles is not in firsthand production but in firsthand consumption. And this is where she must negotiate the language of textiles; she must learn which goods suit herself, not others. She must learn to manipulate her representation via textiles.

When Cassandra describes her mother's winter room, she notes the "oppressive atmosphere of the room" (6). Her observation suggests that material goods, such as textiles and furniture, may convey a mood or represent a value. Cassandra Morgeson's reaction to her mother's room points out the individuation necessary among domestic spaces. The colors and textures that suit Mrs. Morgeson do not suit her. Similarly, Downing and Loudon counseled potential home-buyers to select the style and size of a home specially suited to their income and station in life. It should follow, then, that interior domestic spaces should be specially suited to their inhabitants. Expensive silk velvets and brocades might suit a well-off woman's apartment; they would not be suitable for a child's playroom. The decoration of domestic space should also be pleasing to its inhabitants. Mrs. Morgeson's style feels "oppressive" to Cassandra. Not only does she balk at the colors and textures, Cassandra rebels against a domestic space over which she has no control. The room is "oppressive" mainly because she cannot effect changes there and because it reflects another's individuality instead of her own. When

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<sup>121</sup> Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 10.

Cassandra later chooses the new decorations for her own room, her mother and aunt both revile and approve: "They declared, at once, they were stifled; too many things in the room; too warm; too dark; the fringe on the mantel would catch fire and burn me up; too much trouble to take care of it. What was under the carpet that made it so soft and the steps so noiseless: How nice it was!" (143-144). The women especially respond to the carpets which "soften the hardness of life" in a move toward both comfort and "gentility."<sup>122</sup> The women seem to recognize the sovereignty of each bedchamber, a place where each woman could exert her own personality, either to reveal or conceal it.

Cassandra does not feel at home in her sister Veronica's redecorated room. She acknowledges, however, the symbolism of the colors and fabrics, as Veronica brings the natural world into her own domestic space. Cassandra explains,

Veronica's room was like no other place. I was in a new atmosphere there. A green carpet covered the floor, and the windows had light blue silk curtains.

'Green and blue together, Veronica?'

'Why not? The sky is blue, and the carpet of the earth is green.'

'If you intend to represent the heavens and the earth here, it is very well.'

The paper on the wall was ash-colored with penciled lines. She had cloudy days probably. (134)

Textiles here symbolize the fact that Veronica has made her home her entire world. By moving colors of the natural world into her domestic space, she has no need ever

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<sup>122</sup> Federhen, *Accumulation and Display*, 9.

to leave. In fact, Veronica doesn't like the sea. Veronica hates turmoil and storm, even a change in domestic space. She only leaves the house in Surrey to move into one next door with her husband Ben Somers. Veronica also pastes up a picture of St. Cecilia, stacks up her books of writing, chooses supposedly incompatible colors of green and blue, and brings in leaves and a bird's nest. Her room is eclectic and reveals her interests and deviance from popular taste. The fact that Cassandra consents to read Veronica's textile choices as "the heavens and the earth" shows her acknowledgment of their representative or semiotic power and the decorator's right to individuate space.

The girls' sensitivity to fabric directs their individuation of space. For instance, Cassy and Veronica respond to certain fabrics and colors. Veronica cannot bear bombazine: "Veronica refused to wear the bonnet and veil and the required bombazine. Bombazine made her flesh crawl. Why should she wear it? Mother hated it, too, for she had never worn out the garments made for Grand'ther Warren" (210). Veronica has an Usher-esque hypersensitivity to the texture and associations of the fabric.<sup>123</sup> Bombazine, a twill weave fabric of both silk and wool, was the serviceable fabric used for dresses and draperies of mourning; it was almost always dyed black.<sup>124</sup> Aunt Mercy, who takes comfort in the social rituals of mourning garb, uses the black dresses to convey her sincere grief and to welcome the overtures of sympathetic guests. But Veronica and, to some extent, Cassy begin to discount these social courtesies as hollow. They don't need to express their grief so publicly. They harbor it privately. Stoddard considers how such a sensitivity to fabrics may

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<sup>123</sup> Matlack, "Hawthorne and Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard," 294.

<sup>124</sup> Carmichael, Linton, & Price, "Bombazine," 44.



also awaken one's sense of self. Fabrics perhaps awaken Cassandra to a sense of her own subjectivity, her unique sense, observation, and reason. Cassandra says, "With feeling comes observation; after that, one reasons" (28). Instead of sensitivity leading to moral awareness, it leads to self-awareness. Cassandra's sensitivity, signaled throughout the novel by the tingling in her fingertips, is aliveness to passion, an awareness of the power of her own choices, a self-knowledge masked or revealed by textiles (67, 141).

Cassandra grows into a heritage of fabric sense when she goes to stay with Charles and Alice Morgeson. Alice shows Cassandra to her room upstairs, and Cassandra reports, "It was a pretty room, with a set of maple furniture, and amber and white wallpaper, and amber and white chintz curtains and coverings. It suited the color of my hair, Alice declared, and was becoming to my complexion" (75). Charles later makes a clandestine midnight visit to the room while Cassandra sleeps there unawares. The sexual tension between the two seems to coincide with Cassandra's awakening to interior space and her own appearance too. Fabric in decoration becomes a metaphor for refashioning one's self. Cassandra's knowledge of the use of textiles in domestic spaces and as apparel is crucial to her dominion in domestic space.

In Stoddard's novel, the gendered division of public and private or domestic spaces (articulated through nineteenth-century architectural and domestic discourse) begins to fray.<sup>125</sup> Alice Morgeson enters the public economy as a mill owner. The

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<sup>125</sup> Sandra Zagarell, in "Strenuous Artistry": Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons*, suggests, "Elizabeth Stoddard stands apart from almost all of her published white female contemporaries in not mobilizing this ideology [the ideology of 'separate spheres which pervaded American white bourgeois culture']. She did not characterize the domestic as being separate and distinct from the public

Morgesons' hired help Temperance eventually marries "an everlasting Betty" who "will do half the housework himself" (155). The private sphere is ungendered. In short, space becomes available for unconventional inscriptions. Stoddard offers other examples of masculine influence in the supposedly feminine domestic sphere. Charles Morgeson exerts dictatorial control over the domestic sphere; he decides the timing of meals and the placement of vases of flowers he grows. The parlor even seems to reflect his dark and passionate nature in its possibly rococo-revival style. Cassandra describes entering the room:

Windows extending to the floor opening on the piazza, but notwithstanding the stream of light over the carpet, I thought it somber, and out of keeping with the cottage exterior. The walls were covered with dark red velvet paper, the furniture was dark, the mantel and table tops were black marble, and the vases and candelabra were bronze. He directed mother's attention to the portraits of his children, explaining them, while I went to a table between the windows to examine the green and white sprays of some delicate flower I had never before seen. Its fragrance was intoxicating. I lifted the heavy vase which contained it; it was taken from me gently by Charles, and replaced. (69)

Charles superintends the domestic space in which his wife merely resides. Not only does he masculinize the domestic space, he stamps it with his own individuality.

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sphere, and she was relatively indifferent to the claims many of her contemporaries made in the name of the home or woman's sphere" (294).

Charles's decorations defy notions of fitness. His home's cottage exterior gives way to a lush, dark, perhaps even dissipated-looking interior. Pattern book author Loudon warns, "So also the expression of architectural style applies, not only to the building taken as a whole, which must be in the same style throughout, but to all its component parts, which, even to the most minute details, must belong to that style, and exhibit its characteristics."<sup>126</sup> And yet Charles's deliberate defiance of advice from architectural pattern books reveals his confidence in his own taste, his declaration of a new aesthetic. Stoddard writes, "He examined many matters which are usually left to women, and he applied his business talent to the art of living, succeeding in it as he did in everything else" (76). His concern for the domestic details that appeal to the senses (flowers, textures of textiles, arrangements of Cassy's hair) implies a sensual battle of wills, a challenge to Cassy to confront and embrace her animal nature, her subjectivity. The selections for the apartment represent the passionate nature that resonates with Cassandra in particular. Cassandra is intoxicated by his flowers; her senses respond to his bold choices of domestic arrangement.

After Charles's death and Cassandra's return to Surrey, Cassandra exercises a new sense of the fitness of her own habitation. She claims her space and marks it as her own: "I had a comfortable sense of property, when I took possession of my own room. It was better, after all, to live with a father and mother, who would adopt my ideas. Even the sea might be mine. I asked father the next morning, at breakfast, how far out at sea his property extended" (129). When she cannot control the sea, Cassandra controls space with textiles.

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<sup>126</sup> Loudon, *Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm, and Villa Architecture and Furniture*, 4.

### **Writing with Textiles, Preserving Space**

Cassandra's new bedroom decorations conceal more than they reveal. She has damask nailed over the panels of her wooden doors; on her shelves she places damask with fringe to hide the edges. She slipcovers the hair-cloth chairs. She also has the walls painted an amber color reminiscent of her room at Charles and Alice's house. She hangs no pictures. Her room, in fact, reveals nothing about her beyond her command of the language of decoration. Her room is stylish but not particular. She offers this description:

The day when the room was ready, Fanny made a wood fire, which burned merrily, and encouraged the new chairs, tables, carpet, and curtains into a friendly assimilation; they met and danced on the round tops of the brass dogs. It already seemed to me that I was like the room. Unlike Veronica, I had nothing odd, nothing suggestive. My curtains were blue chintz, and the sofa and chairs were covered with the same; the ascetic aspect of my two hair-cloth arm-chairs was entirely concealed. The walls were painted amber color, and varnished. There were no pictures but the shining shadows. A row of shelves covered with blue damask was on one side, and my tall mirror on the other. The doors were likewise covered with blue damask, nailed round with brass nails. When I had nothing else to do I counted the nails. The wooden mantel shelf, originally painted in imitation of black marble, I covered with damask, and fringed it. (143-144)

Her new-decorated room reflects her desire to control and conceal, to regulate space. The fringe on her mantel is a type of shelf lambrequin popular in the nineteenth-century to hide edges.<sup>127</sup> The damask, in fact, is a reversible, or perhaps two-faced, material.<sup>128</sup> Damask is the less expensive cousin to brocade and likely made with American cotton and woven in New England mills in combination with imported silk or linen. Not only is it a hybrid material, it is also a reversible one. Its patterns are figured on the reverse side in negative. The blue damask signals Cassandra's dual nature of represented self and inner self hidden behind (on the back of) a presented self or fabric. Cassandra is "like the room" in that she chooses a complex domesticity. Zagarell, a dedicated and admiring Stoddard critic, suggests that Cassandra "signals her strategy of partial conformity, partial modification, by refurnishing her girlhood room in an elegant manner which conveys her defiant sexual maturity yet also exhibits the feminine polish she had so strongly resisted in school."<sup>129</sup> Indeed, Cassandra's use of textiles transforms domestic space, but her language is deceptive. Her room reveals little of her inner nature as pattern book authors encourage.<sup>130</sup>

To complicate Zagarell's interpretation, I suggest that Cassandra aims for more than elegance. She aims to individuate her personal space also as an

<sup>127</sup> Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 132, 151.

<sup>128</sup> A twentieth-century textile dictionary defines damask: "[a] firm lustrous fabric figured with more or less elaborate Jacquard designs. Commonly made with warp and filling face satin weaves, one for the figure and the other for the ground. Somewhat similar to brocade but flatter and reversible. Made of linen, cotton, rayon, silk, or various combinations. May be all white, piece dyed, or warp and filling in different colors. Used for napkins, tablecloths, draperies, upholstery, etc." (Carmichael, Linton, & Price, "Damask," 111).

<sup>129</sup> Zagarell, "Repossession," 50.

<sup>130</sup> Karen Halttunen, in *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870*, describes the possible danger of fashion—and perhaps also domestic furnishings—"as the art of surface illusion" through which perception of character could grow difficult (63).

informational preserve, a space where she can harbor, not divulge, her self. She deliberately chooses textile goods whose semiotic representations are not “suggestive,” goods that testify generally to taste or “polish” but that do not reveal personal eccentricity. The opaque chintz and damask—used as door, chair, and shelf coverings—symbolize Cassy’s own desire to conceal. Their tranquil blue color purposefully misrepresents her inner, turbulent nature. Cassandra steadfastly resists transparency of character. Veronica, astutely interpreting Cassy’s personal space, notes of the fire in the fireplace: “It is the only reality here” (145).

Cassandra’s room shows her at the vanguard of a domestic transition, from sentimental to theatrical.<sup>131</sup> She rejects sentimental conventions of sincerity in dress or domestic furnishing. Sincere consumption suggested that goods could serve as “an index of character.”<sup>132</sup> Domestic historian Katherine Grier explains, “In a fundamental way, carefully planned rooms were designed to be rhetorical statements in the sense that they consciously or unconsciously expressed aspirations, what a person believed or wished to believe.”<sup>133</sup> Cassandra’s turn to theatrical, or insincere, furnishing codes her personal space as a stage in which she can experiment with her self-representation, regulate others’ knowledge of her, and achieve a private self-knowledge.<sup>134</sup> The textiles serve as “props” in her personal space, a personal expression through which she may learn to read and know herself, a neutral space in which she learns to moderate the expense of her emotional passion. Thus, Cassandra’s domestic consumption is decidedly non-

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<sup>131</sup> Halttunen, *Confidence Men*, 195.

<sup>132</sup> Halttunen, *Confidence Men*, 159.

<sup>133</sup> Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 12.

<sup>134</sup> As I point out in Chapter Four, sincerity and insincerity are more complex than the binary suggests. Here, though, Cassy intends “insincerity” to mislead.

pious. Her consumption is not to “‘civilize’ and ‘socialize’”<sup>135</sup> others but to subvert aspects of civilization itself.

After meeting and falling in love with Desmond Somers, she returns to her home in Surrey, where she “invested our isolated house with the dignity of a stage, where the drama, which my thoughts must continually represent, could go on without interruption, and remain a secret I should have no temptation to reveal” (201).

Although she finds the “prosaic domain” of house-keeping confining, Cassandra reverts to the lesson that “[c]omposure came with putting my drawers and shelves in order” (216, 217). In the domestic space, she controls her representation and conceals those passions she cherishes.

Cassandra’s manipulations of her self-representation show how she has matured. Cassandra recalls of her youth, “But one thing I know of myself then—that I concealed nothing; the desires and emotions which are usually kept as a private fund I displayed and exhausted” (58). She was left empty, with no secret knowledge of herself to contemplate, refigure: she says, “the life within me seemed a black cave” (21). Her visits to Charles and Alice in Rosville and to the Somerses in Belem, however, teach her to harness and privatize the force of her desires. Her friend Helen Perkins articulates their mutual rejection of transparency, disclosure, and self-sacrifice generally expected of true women:

‘What is the use of talking to you? Besides, if we keep on we may tell secrets that had better not be revealed. We might not like each other so well; friendship is apt to dull if there is no ground for

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<sup>135</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 90.

speculation left. Let us keep the bloom on the fruit, even if we know there is a worm at the core.'

I owed it to her that I never had any confidante. My proclivities were for speaking what I felt; but her strong common-sense influenced me greatly against it; her teaching was the more easy to me, as she never invaded my sentiments. (151)

Cassandra thus learns to guard carefully her private store of feeling. Harboring her private emotions and dreams fills the void within her, and she fears others' scrutiny that would analyze and annihilate her informational preserve. She resists Veronica and Ben's desire to own her: "I think both [Veronica and Ben] would have annihilated my personality if possible, for the sake of comprehending me, for both loved me in their way" (156).

Cassandra's facial scars memorialize her battles against "annihilation." In particular, the very "public" marks remind her of her passion for Charles, a passion she refuses to relinquish as shameful; the scars and the passion are vital to her nature. Cassy chooses not to conceal the marks on what Goffman calls her "sheath," however. Her scars are a type of stigma which Cassy forces society to confront.<sup>136</sup> Whereas Cassandra once wore a pink French calico to conform with girlhood fashion, she now wears her scars proudly as a sign of her non-conformity in terms of appetite. She has departed from conventional notions of middle-class

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<sup>136</sup> Goffman discusses three types of stigmas, including "abominations of the body—the various physical deformities," "blemishes of individual character" and "tribal stigmas of race, nation, and religion" (Goffman, "The Stigmatized Self," 73). He also outlines three ways of coping with them: concealment, cover, or disclosure (Manning, *Erving Goffman*, 99).



womanhood. Critic Jennifer Putzi explains that the scars “are crucial to her sense of self and her redefinition of womanhood as the result of experience.”<sup>137</sup>

To prevent “annihilation,” Cassandra turns down the fabrics that most reflect her taste and interests. Mill owner Alice Morgeson, who marries Cassandra’s father after Charles’s death, is perhaps the only person who understands the passions of her sometime cousin, rival, and new stepdaughter; in fact, they have much in common in their unconventional roles. Alice’s gift to Cassandra shows that she knows her new step-daughter on a level deeper than the fabric she sends with Mr. Morgeson. He unwraps for Cassandra “a sea-green and white velvet carpet, with a scarlet leaf on it, and a piece of sea-green and white brocade for curtains” (248-249). Cassandra realizes, “Had [Alice] sought the world over, she could have found nothing to suit me so well” (249). And Cassandra refuses the gift. She will not let this woman and rival know her; she refuses to confirm Alice’s knowledge; she retains her privacy and secrecy (represented in the blue damask) rather than display textiles which represent her inner self.<sup>138</sup> (Perhaps she prefers her father’s “failing [which] was to buy an immense quantity of everything he fancied,” usually things “wholly unsuited in general to the style and taste of each of us” [23].) Cassandra’s domesticity lies in controlling property and its appearance, not in providing a home whose style and furnishings transparently reveal character. Cassandra foretells a new future of domestic space, a future in which women manipulate space not for moral purposes but for the assertion (or concealment) of one’s self.

<sup>137</sup> Putzi, “Tattooed still,” 172. See also Baumgartner, “Intimate Reflections,” 195.

<sup>138</sup> Critic Christopher Hager notes, “If annihilation is the consequence, even the means, of comprehension, the rhetorical knots of Cassandra’s self-narration constitute a protective measure” (“Hunger for the Literal,” 723).

As Cassandra comes to realize the passion of her nature—her own subjectivity—she wields the language of textiles to negotiate her movement in society. She knows how she will decorate, dress, and manage the household. She discovers “her own capabilities” of household management.<sup>139</sup> After her mother’s death, Cassandra grows delirious with her sole control of the Surrey house by the sea: “My ownership oppressed me, almost, there was so much liberty to realize” (248). Ultimately, though, she will realize this liberty. She gains sole possession of the Surrey house, and Desmond Somers comes to marry and live with her there. He arrives after having conquered his alcoholism and having shown himself to be as strong and independent as Cassandra.

### Conclusion

Cassandra is Stoddard’s pattern for refashioned domestic womanhood. Her character has been formed in the Barmouth granite which peeks up under Grandfather Warren’s house foundation and in the relentless power of the sea which nearly laps at her house in Surrey. She explains, “[I]t seemed to me that he [great-grandfather Locke Morgeson] was born under the influence of the sea, while the rest of the tribe inherited the character of the landscape” (9). In fact, “they were not a progressive or changeable family” (8). Cassandra’s old family is sustained only by its “family recipes for curing herbs and hams, and making cordials, [which] were in better preservation than the memory of their makers” (8). It is interesting that Cassandra’s family heritage is sustained by female products of domestic space. Although the makers have been forgotten, their products endure. She is vibrant and

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<sup>139</sup> Harris, “Stoddard’s *The Morgesons*,” 19.

wayward, much like the awesome matriarchs she meets and admires in Belem, women such as Mrs. Hepburn who recognizes in her a kindred spirit. Mrs. Hepburn gives her “a peculiar pair of ear-rings, and a brooch of aqua-marina stones, in a setting perforated like a net” (177). “They suit you. Will you accept such an old-fashioned ornament?” Mrs. Hepburn says (177). Mrs. Hepburn sees the future in Cassandra. She places faith in the new type of womanhood and domesticity that Cassandra represents. The power of the sea, the aquamarine color, is caught in a net-like setting. Is it perhaps a warning to Cassandra? A reminder not to let her power—the power of the changing, turbulent sea—be ensnared by old-fashioned notions of womanhood?

Cassandra feels no compunction to be transparent, to reveal her inner self by her choices of fabrics. Instead, she is content to remain awash in the “undercurrent” of her nature which so baffles her father (137). She is content to be layered and complex, to use textiles unsuited to her, to refuse Alice’s gift of textiles which would reveal too much of her inner self, to manipulate her representation, to be many things at once, to harbor secret passion, to embrace a love of beauty, even a self-love. She retains an animal part of her nature (27, 71, 133, 183, 184) and relies on her instincts (73, 221). As a result, Cassandra is a new type of woman, one with no fear of opinion (188), one with a desire to fight (193), and one whose senses cry, “Have then at life!” (214). Mrs. Hepburn recognizes in Cassandra a new type of woman. She assures her, “A woman like you need not question whether a thing is convenable” (190). And Cassandra does not question. Cassandra takes her rights by textile expression, via clothing and decoration of domestic space. Each new

piece of fabric is a replacement of the old for the new, a superseding of generations and conceptions of domestic womanhood.

In *The Morgesons*, Stoddard forces a reconsideration of conventional, middle-class domesticity as seen in Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*. Stoddard's constellation of characters demonstrate how the middle-class home often lacks the affectional and gravitational pull necessary for middle-class families to cohere. In the Morgeson household, Cassandra discovers that her mother is not necessarily nurturing and that her mother's religion offers little guidance for self-development beyond, "Read the Bible and sew more." In fact, Mary Morgeson is "a stark symbol of failed domesticity."<sup>140</sup>

Cassandra's domestic practice and textile expression map out a new course of domestic womanhood. She recommends the unapologetic declaration of personal space through textile furnishing (or unfurnishing, in the case of the tablecloth swept off), particularly in the competitive market of domestic space. She also abrogates conventional female piety and transparency. Instead, her form of womanhood relies on an open embrace of her appetitive "instincts" and a refusal of self-abnegation.

Stoddard's novel, although focused on Cassandra's growth to self-possession, nevertheless anticipates larger cultural shifts toward increasingly broad conventions of womanhood and domesticity. Alice Morgeson, for instance, owns and manages a cotton mill with the same attention she used to devote to her children. But the textile ownership and expression that Alice and Cassandra deploy to bolster their claims to subjectivity and space are not available to all women. In

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<sup>140</sup> Dobson, "Read the Bible," 29.

Phelps's *The Silent Partner* (1871), the protagonist explores the failure of textiles to provide independence and subjectivity to the mill workers who make them. The novel undercuts many of the myths associated with textiles and the early "mill girls."

## CHAPTER 6

### TEXTILE MILLS AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DOMESTIC WOMANHOOD IN ELIZABETH STUART PHELPS'S *THE SILENT PARTNER*

#### Introduction

As mid-nineteenth-century northeastern United States mills produced three quarters of a billion yards of fabric per year, authors such as Susan Warner capitalized on textiles' ubiquity by using textile imagery (of upholstery, drapery, and garments) to analyze and critique predominant conceptions of middle-class domesticity.<sup>1</sup> Warner's critique frequently centered on textile *consumption* as productive of a nurturing domestic environment.<sup>2</sup> She and others demonstrated textiles' role in forming a healthy middle-class home; they endowed textiles with affective associations; they isolated particular textile properties in order to support these associations and meanings; they experimented in their fiction with textiles' deployment in sometimes ironic ways; they investigated the shifting nature of textile meaning according to context. For instance, even as textiles are implicated in the endless replication of middle-class domesticity in single-family homes (as we've seen in Warner), they also interrupt the conventions of

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<sup>1</sup> Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, "A Rags to Riches Tale," 8, gives statistics for 1856 at 774,588 thousands of yards. The article cites some of its statistics to an earlier source: Davis, Lance E. and H. Louis Stettler III, "The New England Textile Industry, 1825-1860: Trends and Fluctuations," in National Bureau of Economic Research, *Studies in Income and Wealth, Output, Employment, and Productivity in the United States After 1900*, 30 (1966).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of consumption as a form of production, see Lori Merish's *Sentimental Materialism*. She describes, for example, the ways in which consumption actually helped to sustain "the production process" as with mass market goods (9), to reify the "class relations" that support this process (9), and to establish a buyer's "subjectivity" (11).

middle-class domesticity. As I argue in Chapter Five, Stoddard's *The Morgesons* implicates textile consumption in the breakdown of gendered spheres and expectations necessary to traditional middle-class conventions of domesticity. Charles Morgeson views textiles not only as the means to his livelihood—from his mostly invisible cotton mill—but also as a means of controlling domestic space.

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844-1911), however, delves into the site of textile *production*—the mills themselves—and unveils the brutalizing labor behind the textiles on which middle-class domesticity and textile refinement is predicated, much as Wilson does in *Our Nig*. Once Phelps uncovers the realities of mill work, she is aghast at the seemingly irreconcilable textile contexts of production and consumption. The divorce between these contexts is largely the result of what we now identify as the “alienation” of labor, a process that, for Phelps at least, taints and diminishes the promise of textile consumption to elevate and to nurture domestic space. Phelps's novel, *The Silent Partner*, explores how processes of production may be redeemed.

In *The Silent Partner* (1871), Phelps describes attempts to ameliorate labor conditions and to reinvest textiles with powers of uplift, both social and financial. Ultimately, however, she expresses an ambivalence concerning textiles' ability either to support middle-class domesticity (as Warner suggests) or to provide the economic foundation for a capacious, domestic sisterhood. Indeed, protagonist Perley Kelso (the “silent partner” in a cotton mill) and her mill-girl friend Sip Garth end the novel at an impasse, still fighting the snarls of poverty and hopelessness in the mill town of Five Falls, Massachusetts. Although Perley and Sip model a cross-class, celibate sisterhood, they fail to procure conditions favorable for the expansion of this reformed

domesticity, and they suppress wistful longing for middle-class marriage and family. Phelps thus investigates the failed possibility of a cross-class, self-sufficient sisterhood nostalgically evoked by the mill setting and its early, utopian mill-girl associations. The ending of her novel, according to a review in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, "ravels out, and leaves a ragged and unfinished edge."<sup>3</sup> The novel's lack of neat closure, of a strengthened, bound selvage<sup>4</sup>, suggests the difficulties in weaving new configurations of "home" with existing theories of political economy and domestic womanhood in which the protagonist is implicated.

After an overview of Phelps's life and work, this chapter relies on a consideration of nineteenth-century "political economy," a popular term used to explain the political, social, and economic workings of the marketplace. Phelps herself identifies in the novel a tradition of political economists such as Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, theoretical descendants of John Locke and liberal individualism, which espoused a laissez-faire capitalism that Perley Kelso finds negligent. In turn, the chapter traces how mill conditions and textiles produced under the aegis of this political economy both guard and challenge an exclusive middle-class domesticity. Here, I use historical and material culture approaches to contextualize the frequent textile images and metaphors which, by exposing sites of production, challenge models of pious consumption.<sup>5</sup>

I propose that Phelps unveils the disjunction between textile production and consumption in order to question middle-class constructs of textiles' ability to soften the home and thus contribute to the production of domesticity. Indeed, Phelps demystifies

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<sup>3</sup> Qtd. in Bardes & Gossett, *Declarations of Independence*, 119.

<sup>4</sup> Selvage is the bound edge of fabric as it comes from the loom.

<sup>5</sup> The term, "pious consumption," is from Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (1990).



the fetishization of domestic textiles by exposing the labor behind them. More than this, the dangerous and (to some extent) coerced labor she discovers changes the signifying power of the textiles; the labor associations trump affective associations with which middle-class consumers usually endow domestic textiles. Material culture theorist Judy Attfield explains how experiences may suffuse a garment, a particular form of textile. She explains, “the personal experiences associated with garments infiltrates [sic] the fabric, not to transform the garment but to change the user’s practice, so that what was once worn had to be discarded.”<sup>6</sup> I would argue that domestic textiles—often as intimate, permeable and malleable as garments—are similarly “infiltrated” by experiences. Once acknowledged, these experiences forever change a consumer’s memory and affective associations of the material. For instance, Perley’s awareness that her textiles are produced in workplaces rife with illness and injury changes her understanding of how textiles operate in her home. They now mark her obligation to expand her home (with all of the nurturing that implies) to include her “family” of workers. Although she does not discard her curtains and shawls, she changes her use of them.

Perley’s answer to her new-found knowledge is to open her home. Surprisingly, Perley never abandons her belief in the refining, uplifting power of textiles in the middle-class home. She invites laborers into her home to partake of “domestic environmentalism,” a belief that “conflated moral guidance with the actual appearance and physical layout of the house and its contents.”<sup>7</sup> Those workers who accept her invitation are those willing to accede to the ritualized, reverential use and display of

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<sup>6</sup> Attfield, *Wild Things*, 148.

<sup>7</sup> Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 5.

domestic textiles. In Perley's home, they learn how the textiles they produce may, in turn, produce a comfortable domestic environment which invites leisure as well as occupations of self-improvement such as readings or musicales. In no way, though, does Phelps guarantee (nor should she) that one's appreciation of textiles—one's refinement—signals moral awareness.

Thus, Phelps questions the formation of middle-class domesticity and all it entails. In rethinking the misunderstood basis of textile consumption, Phelps also begins to rethink other facets of domesticity. As an unmarried woman of a certain age (27 or so at the time of *The Silent Partner's* publication), Phelps herself recognized the need for women to restructure true womanhood, of which domesticity was a component. How might white middle-class women reconfigure domesticity without a husband, family, and single-family home structure? Might a "family" of affectional attachment take the place of one of blood or legal relation? How might women imagine personal satisfaction and fulfillment through work in the public sphere? Must they mark their womanhood against race and class? How might true womanhood evolve into the New Womanhood?<sup>8</sup> Phelps investigates domestic options available to women in a textile mill town; she also reveals the unstable meanings, uses, and associations of textiles and critiques her protagonist's own reluctance to abandon or reconcile textiles' uses in nurturing the middle-class home. Although Phelps provides no definitive answers to the questions above, she does, through her characters' trials and choices, suggest ways that women might establish aspirations beyond conventional middle-class domesticity.

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<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of concepts of womanhood as they relate to Phelps, see Cognard-Black, *Narrative in the Professional Age*, 118, and Amireh, *The Factory Girl and the Seamstress*, 150.

### Phelps's Life and Work

Phelps's own life and work proves a study in negotiations for woman's place—physically, educationally, economically, and politically—in society. Despite chronic invalidism, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps extended herself beyond the couch and sickroom, writing to offer comfort to others and to effect change in society.<sup>9</sup> In her lifetime of writings, Phelps advocated homeopathy, temperance, women's rights (made especially famous in her novel *The Story of Avis*)—including participation in professions, suffrage, and dress reform<sup>10</sup>—antivivisection, and labor reforms, as in *The Silent Partner*.<sup>11</sup> (“‘Where *did* she get it?’ conservative friends used to wail, whenever I was seen to have tumbled into the last new and unfashionable reform,” she concedes in her memoirs.<sup>12</sup>) Her considerable body of literary and social work benefited from her coterie of friends and fellow writers with whom she discussed and corresponded. She claimed acquaintance with Harriet Beecher Stowe<sup>13</sup>; Longfellow, Whittier, and Holmes<sup>14</sup>,

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<sup>9</sup> Phelps's 1896 memoirs contain a section titled “Shut In” on her experiences with chronic insomnia. Even on this personal struggle, Phelps offers advice: “Avoid dependence on narcotics as you would that circle in the Inferno . . . fly from drugs as you would from that poison of the Borgias” (*Chapters from a Life*, 239); “Cease to trouble yourself whether you are understood or sympathized with by your friends, or even by your physicians” (240); “Do not be afraid to act for yourself. Define your own conditions of cure” (240). Carol Farley Kessler, in *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*, offers an insightful psychological reading of Phelps's mother's invalidism (4). Invalidism and frailty, in terms of “true womanhood,” were the mark of spiritual or ethereal character, as with Alcott's Beth March (with thanks here to Jason Williams). Perhaps Phelps's invalidism provided her with an originary “cause” to conquer, a means of control.

<sup>10</sup> Phelps's later work for dress reform shows the disciplinary agency of textiles as apparel. Phelps suggested incremental dress reform to cast off the corset, shorten the skirts (so they wouldn't drag in the street muck and tobacco-stains), and generally free women's bodies for proper movement and exercise. These movements to free women from rather arbitrary social standards of course met with resistance, and many women were uncomfortable with the Bloomer outfit offered as an alternative. For a compilation of her dress reform theories, see Phelps, *What to Wear?*.

<sup>11</sup> Kessler, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*, 76-77.

<sup>12</sup> Phelps, *Chapters from a Life*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Phelps, *Chapters from a Life*, 136.

<sup>14</sup> Phelps, *Chapters from a Life*, 153.

publisher James Fields<sup>15</sup>; Thaxter, Child, and Brooks<sup>16</sup>; Edward Sill<sup>17</sup>; and former mill girl and autobiographer Lucy Larcom.<sup>18</sup>

Phelps's credentials as author and lay theologian were a family legacy as well as a product of her cultivation among Massachusetts society. She was born Mary Gray Phelps in 1844 to Austin Phelps, a pastor and professor of Rhetoric and Homiletics at Andover Seminary,<sup>19</sup> and Elizabeth Stuart, an author for the American Sunday School Union and Massachusetts Sabbath School Society.<sup>20</sup> Phelps, also called "Lily," assumed her mother's name sometime after Elizabeth Stuart's death in 1852. The adoption of the name likely honored her mother and expressed a commitment to her literary legacy. Also, Austin's next two wives were both Marys, Mary Stuart and Mary Ann Johnson.<sup>21</sup>

Phelps had access to the culture and education afforded by a college town and her father's professorial hospitality that introduced figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson to the Phelps' fireside.<sup>22</sup> She attended Abbot Academy and, later, Mrs. Edwards' School for Young Ladies<sup>23</sup> and began writing, seeking out quiet locations apart from her younger brothers. She worked in "a sunny room in the farmhouse of the seminary estate" adjacent to her father's house and later in the family summer house

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<sup>15</sup> Phelps, *Chapters from a Life*, 144. Also, for a discussion of Phelps's publishing experiences, see Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business*.

<sup>16</sup> Phelps, *Chapters from a Life*, 154.

<sup>17</sup> Phelps, *Chapters from a Life*, 221.

<sup>18</sup> Phelps, *Chapters from a Life*, 160-161.

<sup>19</sup> Phelps, *Chapters from a Life*, 23.

<sup>20</sup> Bennett, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Bennett, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Phelps, *Chapters from a Life*, 44.

<sup>23</sup> Bennett, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*, 14; Kessler, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*, 16, 23; and Kelly, *The Life and Works*, 13.

“once used by [her] mother for her own study.”<sup>24</sup> Phelps’s careful record of these places indicates her lifelong concern with the need for women’s spaces.<sup>25</sup> At around age sixteen, Phelps discovered Browning’s poem “Aurora Leigh,” and became inspired “to do some honest, hard work of [her] own in the World Beautiful, and for it.”<sup>26</sup> Foremost Phelps scholar Carol Farley Kessler explains how Phelps put the lesson of “Aurora Leigh” into practice: “If her sex forbade her entering the pulpit to follow in the footsteps of her forefathers, she would use her pen to produce novels, if not sermons, for the reformation of her world.”<sup>27</sup>

Phelps launched her career of writing and reform, eventually moving out on her own, first with her friend, Dr. Mary Briggs Harris, and later alone. She also established a summer home in Gloucester, Massachusetts.<sup>28</sup> She wrote prolifically although sometimes bemoaning the way invalidism impinged upon her creativity. Nevertheless, her early Sunday School stories were eventually succeeded by collections of short stories for adults, poetry (possibly with a “tendency to obscurity”<sup>29</sup>), articles and series in newspapers such as *The Independent*, and novels spanning nearly six decades. The Gates trilogy (1868, 1883, 1887) and *The Story of Avis* (1877) still receive critical attention today.<sup>30</sup> Many, such as *The Successors of Mary the First* (a novel of the trials

<sup>24</sup> Phelps, *Chapters from a Life*, 115.

<sup>25</sup> Kessler, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*, 58.

<sup>26</sup> Phelps, *Chapters from a Life*, 66.

<sup>27</sup> Kessler, “*The Woman’s Hour*,” 62. See also Bennett, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Kessler, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*, 58.

<sup>29</sup> Bennett, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*, 98.

<sup>30</sup> Phelps’s most prominent early success was with a book titled *The Gates Ajar* (1868), first in the Gates trilogy. Sometimes labeled “spiritualist,” the text tells the story of Mary Cabot, who loses her brother Royal in the Civil War, and her aunt, Winifred, who arrives to comfort her with comprehensible and material depictions of the afterlife. Winifred relies on particular biblical interpretations and translations to win her points, and she is convincing enough that when she dies of breast cancer (only discreetly indicated), Mary is able to continue on bravely and hopefully, raising Winifred’s daughter, Faith. This novel depicts women speaking with authoritative voice on previously male-determined religious doctrine and establishing homes comprised of extended female kin—without husbands. Although focused on “a

caused by domestic servants), address women's issues such as the struggle for self-development in the face of monotonous and crushing domestic or wage-earning duties.

Phelps married at age forty-four in October of 1888<sup>31</sup> Herbert Dickinson Ward, whose father edited *The Independent* for which Phelps frequently wrote.<sup>32</sup> Ward was seventeen years younger.<sup>33</sup> The pair coauthored literary works for publication, but none received the acclaim of Phelps's individual works, including *The Silent Partner*, which biographer Mary Angela Bennett claims as "one of Miss Phelps's best books."<sup>34</sup>

Phelps's 1871 novel, *The Silent Partner*,<sup>35</sup> seems an ambivalent coda to the heyday of mill girl opportunity. The novel, which critiques domestic space and labor conditions, was not a dry run for Phelps.<sup>36</sup> In fact, several earlier works addressed facets of domestic and labor conditions for mill workers: *Up Hill, or Life in a Factory* (1865), *Hedged In* (1870), and "The Tenth of January" (1868), a researched piece of fiction on the actual 1860 disaster at Pemberton Mill in Lawrence, Massachusetts.<sup>37</sup> Her admiration and sympathy for mill women comes through in her careful detail of mill

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domestic view of heaven," the book reveals the need for a new earthly post-war order of things, renegotiations of "true womanhood" and domesticity (Kessler, "The Gates Ajar," 455).

<sup>31</sup> Bennett, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*, 88.

<sup>32</sup> Bennett, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*, 84.

<sup>33</sup> Kelly, *The Life and Works*, 16.

<sup>34</sup> Bennett, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*, 60. Kessler, in *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*, writes, "Although Phelps's contemporaries sometimes placed equal value upon her stories, her novels are the work upon which her reputation rests, then as now" (125).

<sup>35</sup> Phelps, *The Silent Partner*; hereafter cited in text.

<sup>36</sup> Kessler, "The Woman's Hour," 99-100.

<sup>37</sup> The textile mill collapsed when a flawed iron support gave way, trapping 88 or so workers. But the conflagration sparked by a rescuer's lantern sealed the workers' fate. Horrified onlookers later recalled the victims singing hymns as the flames overtook them. The event so moved Phelps that she dedicates part of a chapter in her memoir to the catastrophe. Although she was not allowed to visit the scene as one of her brothers was (*Chapters from a Life*, 91), she memorialized the tragedy in her fiction. Her memoirs attend to the "careless inspectors" who overlooked the "defective core" (89) of the pillar but also to the trapped mill girls who met death with singing: "their young souls took courage from the familiar sound of one another's voices. They sang the hymns and songs which they had learned in the schools and churches" (90). See also Kessler, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*, 41.

life, partially gathered during her volunteer work at Abbot Hill, a nearby factory town.<sup>38</sup>

*Up Hill* in fact has an upper middle-class character named Miss Grant who works to convert the mill girls Kate and Mary. They scorn religion and carve in the pews at the Sabbath school;<sup>39</sup> they are embarrassed to show humility or kindness, qualities seen as weaknesses amidst the reels at the textile mill. After many vicissitudes, they are both converted. Miss Grant rewards her pupils with a tea at her house, full of flowers and marble, which Kate has the inherent refinement to appreciate. But Kate concludes, "O Miss Grant! You don't know—you never lived as we do! It's easy for people to be Christians in fine homes, with good people all about them; but for us—it does seem as if was all rocks and all hill, and never any easy places!"<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Kate's cry highlights the perceived influence of environment on Christian conversion and refinement, an influence Phelps confronts also in *The Silent Partner*. (In *The Silent Partner*, though, middle-class refinement—sometimes just a social polish of dress and manners—does not necessarily prefigure Christian morality, as seen in the unconscionable obliviousness of middle- and upper-class mill owners to the plight of their workers. It does, however, as Kate suggests, provide the comfort and security conducive to moral contemplation.) Miss Grant seems a precursor to Perley Kelso in *The Silent Partner* and Kate an early Sip.

Perley Kelso is the twenty-something protagonist and daughter of a Massachusetts textile mill owner crushed at his own freight depot mere pages into the

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<sup>38</sup> Kessler explains that Phelps taught Sunday school there (*Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*, 27); Kelly, *The Life and Works*, 11. Phelps also had an affinity for textiles. Her memoir, *Chapters from a Life*, vividly recalls the "canary yellow" of her childhood cape (10-11) and the purple gingham of a dress (18).

<sup>39</sup> Phelps, *Up Hill*, 5.

<sup>40</sup> Phelps, *Up Hill*, 311. Kessler, in "The Woman's Hour," writes that Miss Grant "sees that their [Kate's and Mary's] environment places nearly insurmountable constraints upon their lives" (101). This concern with the limitations of environment recurs in *The Silent Partner*.

novel. Lacking occupation and interest, Perley turns her attention to the Hayle and Kelso cotton mills. When she asks to take her father's seat in the partnership, the Hayles, father and son, relegate her to a "silent partnership" where she can exert her woman's influence via her fiancé, young Maverick Hayle. Silenced but not satisfied, Perley dedicates her money and energy to improving the lives of the mill people. She is guided by her twenty-year-old mill-girl friend, Sip Garth, a weaver in the Hayle and Kelso mills who has also recently lost her mill-working father in a gear accident. Sip has the care of her blind, deaf, and mute sister Catty, whose condition Sip attributes to work in the mills. Sip reveals a picture of the poverty and figurative homelessness of the Hayle and Kelso operatives. Together, the girls reach out to the mill workers. They initiate a library, a lecture series, a new chapel for mill folk, and cultural evenings at Perley's house where she engages a famous pianist, promotes literary readings, and organizes dances. In the course of the book, Perley breaks off her engagement to Maverick Hayle, the junior partner, and rejects the suit of another; Sip, too, rejects an offer of marriage from a mill watchman. Instead, both women figuratively wed themselves to the mill people whose lives they hope to improve.

### **Phelps's Evocation of the History of the New England Mills**

Because Perley and Sip in *The Silent Partner* each refuse marriage and motherhood and establish a partnership of uplift, one might be pardoned for thinking that Phelps envisions a cross-class sisterhood of reform as an alternative to the middle-class domesticity. Phelps's project is more complicated, even as her novel shows reform on a far more limited scale. Each woman labors for the salvation—Perley for the



domestic and Sip for the spiritual—of the textile workers, but the women never locate their work in the same place. Perley continues to work from her home and library, and Sip from the street corner where she preaches. They do not consolidate forces in a female boarding house, for instance.<sup>41</sup> As one critic notes, “Reform is not a communal project in *The Silent Partner*, but an individual journey.”<sup>42</sup> This “atomization” of female reform seems surprising given the rich history of the mills as sites of refined female communities and labor action. In fact, Perley and Sip reach very few mill workers, usually only those predisposed to associate the “higher” sensibilities of aesthetic appreciation and spirituality with improvement of condition. Other workers, seeking immediate amelioration of squalid conditions and doubting the palliative, nebulous returns of “uplift” and education do not respond to the women’s projects. Perley and Sip’s inability to reach the masses first exposes the limitations of the “uplift” method; secondly, it theorizes a degradation of the mill working population from earlier depictions of mill girls as inherently refined.

Phelps’s 1871 novel uses the textile mill setting first to evoke associations and contrasts with the utopian portrayals of early mill girl life in the 1830s and 1840s. During the heydays of the 1830s and 1840s, working- and middle-class women poured into New England mill towns to put their home industry and faculty to work at individual tasks in the textile process, ran and chaperoned female boarding houses, used leisure time to pursue self-improvement, and amassed savings. Famous observers remarked on the women’s tasteful dress and aspiration for refined accomplishments such as proficiency

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<sup>41</sup> Female boarding houses proved powerful locations for working women; later in the century, women who established boarding “clubs” secured themselves from eviction when they went on strike and lost wages. See Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, 100.

<sup>42</sup> Long, “The Postbellum Reform Writings,” 269.

at the piano. *The Silent Partner's* setting in the textile mills also recalls an industry which, early in the century, had removed feminized, household labor (the spinning and weaving of textiles) into the public sphere, thus stretching notions of gendered spheres and professional opportunity for women. *The Silent Partner* argues, though, that the early promise of mill opportunity has disintegrated from non-alienating labor in healthful communitarian settings into alienating labor conducted by workers who live and work in unwholesome environments. Deteriorated mill conditions, so crucial to Phelps's critique of middle-class textile refinement, arose both from changes in theories of political economy and from advances in textile technology.

As mill conditions evolved, owners' demands on labor did also, usually resulting in a worsening of conditions for workers and a deteriorating of any aspiration or pretense toward the mill as a domesticated extension of home industry. Although two-thirds of American fabric was still homemade in 1820,<sup>43</sup> newly patented machines were making the process more efficient. During the early decades of the nineteenth century, mechanized mills served limited functions in the textile-making community, usually completing only a few tasks in the operation from raw material to woven stuff. By 1790, Rhode Island mills boasted mechanized spindles for spinning cotton fibers into yarn.<sup>44</sup> Such mills then often "put out" their spun thread for weaving on hand looms by individuals in the community or those set up in a factory-sponsored weaving room. In the slower developing wool industry, massive spiked rollers formed new carding

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<sup>43</sup> Rivard, *A New Order of Things*, 19.

<sup>44</sup> Rivard, *A New Order of Things*, 12.

machines which prepared wool for spinning by small mills or home spinners.<sup>45</sup> Mill historian Paul Rivard points out, however,

No longer were the workers in business for themselves. Since weavers were paid by the yard for weaving yarns they didn't own, they were not independent producers of cloth, nor were they entrepreneurs. Instead they were laborers working on a piecework basis. Certainly yarns 'put out' to homes added to the household income, but the pride and integrity often associated with pre-industrial life at the family hearth did not apply to this business. This weaving job was repetitive, no longer creative, and not much fun. One could say that weaving had become mechanical long before it was mechanized.<sup>46</sup>

As more technologies were imported (or stolen) and redesigned from England (which had banned the export of its textile trade secrets), more stages of textile production were mechanized, and workers' labor became ever more "mechanical."

Brick, four-story mills—often 150 feet long and 40 feet wide<sup>47</sup>—with tall windows marching the length of each story (lighting and ventilating the interiors) housed all phases of production: the carding machines, slubbing billies, spinning jennies, looms, and printing machines, dozens on each floor.<sup>48</sup> New England, with its myriad rivers and

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<sup>45</sup> Rivard, *A New Order of Things*, 15.

<sup>46</sup> Rivard, *A New Order of Things*, 22.

<sup>47</sup> Temin, "The Industrialization of New England," 134.

<sup>48</sup> William Moran in *The Belles of New England* (20-23) and Tamara K. Hareven and Randolph Langenbach in *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory-City* (34-38) each give a concise overview of the cotton cloth-making process. Once the cotton has been cleaned of field debris, it is combed into a thick rope pieced together by slubbing billies. Spinning machines draw out the strand and twist it into a slender, strengthened thread on a bobbin or spool. Then the loom is set up with warp threads running the length of the cloth, carefully aligned in harnesses that move up and down to create the weave pattern of the cloth. Bobbins then feed the shuttles that shoot back and forth across the width

streams lacing the region, had millions of gallons of untapped power waiting to drive the waterwheels that powered these machines. The early power looms, fueled by water wheels that drove iron shafts, were introduced by 1814 in Waltham, Massachusetts.<sup>49</sup> The mills in Waltham and Lowell, Massachusetts, however, are rightly famous for initiating the first full-service textile community (the "Waltham System") which "powered" all stages of production to final cloth in one building's several stories and housed its operatives nearby.<sup>50</sup> By 1840, New England had 700 full textile mills<sup>51</sup>; by 1871 Lowell and Fall River, Massachusetts, boasted over a million spindles for spinning cotton.<sup>52</sup> When the heavy iron shafts that conveyed power via cogs to the spinning jennies and looms threatened to pull down the mill buildings, the machinists designed lighter shafts and instituted leather belts that conveyed power across the floors of machines.<sup>53</sup> And when the looms at the top of the building began to shake the building loose as they jogged in unison, they were relocated to the lower floors and topped by earlier stages of production.<sup>54</sup> Later turbines replaced the waterwheels, generating so much more power that all phases of textile production were dramatically increased.<sup>55</sup> Thus, in Phelps's

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of the cloth on the loom, over and under the warp threads to make the weft or filling. Then the cloth is dyed or printed, inspected for broken threads or pills, and measured off onto bolts.

<sup>49</sup> Rivard, *A New Order of Things*, 44, 58; Dunwell, *The Run of the Mill*, 52; on the lighter wooden shafts, see Dunwell, *The Run of the Mill*, 66; and Rivard, *A New Order of Things*, 58.

<sup>50</sup> Dunwell, *The Run of the Mill*, 31-32; Rivard, *A New Order of Things*, 46. Harriet Hanson Robinson also describes "The Lowell factory system":

a practice which included the then new idea, that corporations should have souls, and should exercise a paternal influence over the lives of their operatives. As Dr. John O. Green of Lowell, in a letter to Lucy Larcom, said: 'The design of the control of the boarding-houses and their inmates was one of the characteristics of the Lowell factory system, early incorporated therein by Mr. Francis Cabot Lowell and his brother-in-law, Patrick T. Jackson, who are entitled to all the credit of the acknowledged superiority of our early operatives.' (Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 4-5)

<sup>51</sup> Rivard, *A New Order of Things*, 8.

<sup>52</sup> Clark, *History of the Manufactures*, 105.

<sup>53</sup> Dunwell, *The Run of the Mill*, 66; Rivard, *A New Order of Things*, 58.

<sup>54</sup> Lowell National Historical Park, placard at Boott Cotton Mills.

<sup>55</sup> Dunwell, *The Run of the Mill*, 62.

1871 novel, early attention to a progressive factory system based on “mutual interests” of capital and labor has yielded to increasingly competitive textile markets and exploitative conditions. (For example, the Canterbury [New Hampshire] Shakers described in Chapter Two had closed their own weaving room in 1869 in favor of inexpensive, factory-made, store-bought goods.) Operatives’ work pace intensified, rendering the work much harder. Mill agents, in turn, reduced the work force with the advances in technology and thus mill conditions for workers worsened. Perley Kelso’s mill in “Five Falls,” possibly drawing on associations with the Fall River, Massachusetts, mills, conducts all phases of cotton cloth manufacture, from bolls to printed calicos. But gone is the vibrant sisterhood of healthful young New England women who had staffed the early mills. Phelps’s mill employs consumptive weavers and children as young as eight. In fact, Sip works as a weaver (50), and little Bub Mell, on another floor, works tending spools (104, 111, 215). Bub dies in the cataclysm of machinery fueled by ever faster textile technologies.

### **The Early Mill Context in Idyllic Retrospect**

Early textile mill life emphasized the domestic nature of textile production. In the 1830s and 1840s near the start of the “Lowell system” of efficient, one-stop cloth-making, Lowell mills hired single and widowed women—whose labor cost less than men’s<sup>56</sup>—to “mother” their machines and nearby boardinghouses. One mill girl of the 1840s described her dressing-frame machine as “unmanageable as an overgrown spoilt child.” She also decorated her workspace with plants and poetry for her study and

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<sup>56</sup> Temin, “The Industrialization of New England,” 115.

improvement.<sup>57</sup> Her workspace was, to her at least, a type of domestic space.

Although women were new to the male-designed machines, women had long associations of working with textiles: carding, spinning, dying, weaving, sewing. These experiences validated the feminine associations of the work and made women suitable candidates for the mill positions such as bobbin girls or weavers. It should be noted, however, that the mill owners, their agents or managers, accountants, and floor-level overseers were men; mill owners who built single-sex boarding houses imposed rules of conduct such as curfews and mandatory attendance at religious services.<sup>58</sup>

Before the time of Phelps's novel, women's wage labor in the mills exceeded subsistence wage and still promised, to some extent, financial and social independence. The women were lured by the chance at hour-driven (rather than task-driven) labor for monetary remuneration. In a retrospective account, early mill girl Harriet Hanson Robinson (1825-1911) marveled at an industrious woman's ability to join the marketplace:

For the first time in this country woman's labor had a money value. She had become not only an earner and a producer, but also a spender of money, a recognized factor in the political economy of her time. And thus a long upward step in our material civilization was taken; woman had begun to earn and hold her own money, and through its aid had learned to think and to act for herself.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, 226; plants described on 181, poems on 175-176. See also Amireh, *The Factory Girl*, 8, and Hapke, *Labor's Text*, 70, 71, on the maternalizing and feminizing phenomena among the mills.

<sup>58</sup> Moran, *The Belles of New England*, 17; Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 47.

<sup>59</sup> Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 42.

Earnings enabled women to achieve a modest financial independence and to chart new lifestyles. On the other hand, Francis Cabot Lowell of the Lowell mills envisioned women making only a temporary stay at his mills, during which time a woman might fund a brother's education, amass a trousseau, or pay off a family mortgage.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, the average stay was less than two years as women worked and occasionally returned home to seek respite, to care for a family member, or to marry.<sup>61</sup> The women's financial independence provided new possibilities in reconfiguring domesticity; women could support themselves without resort to filial or matrimonial obligation. Later Victorian literary utopias envisioned (among other things) "a family structure that freed women from economic dependence on men"<sup>62</sup>—a structure, one might argue, not unlike the community of early mill women who lived in single-sex boarding houses. Moreover, wages and working conditions allowed women the disposable income and the energy to participate in self-improvement and to pursue refinement.

Early mill women participated in a type of discursive communitarian sisterhood reified in later accounts by mill girls themselves.<sup>63</sup> Lucy Larcom (1824-1893), another famous mill girl and popular poet, also wrote an account of her youth and mill work in the 1840s, *A New England Girlhood, Outlined from Memory* (1889). She identified the "large, feminine family" of fifteen- to thirty-year-old women who lodged in the boarding-

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<sup>60</sup> Dunwell, *The Run of the Mill*, 42; Moran, *The Belles of New England*, 8, 15; Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 46, 47.

<sup>61</sup> Rivard, *A New Order of Things*, 95, 106, 108. See also Dickens, *American Notes*, 99.

<sup>62</sup> Kessler, "The Woman's Hour," 76-77.

<sup>63</sup> Despite the working sisterhood, however, Robinson explains that few women wished to commit to permanent communitarian experiments. She writes,

Lectures on the doctrine of Fourier were read, or listened to, but none of them were 'carried away' with the idea of spending their lives in large 'phalansteries,' as they seemed too much like cotton-factories to be models for their own future housekeeping.

The Brook Farm experiment was familiar to some of them; but the fault of this scheme was apparent to the practical ones who foresaw that a few would have to do all the manual labor and that an undue share would naturally fall to those who had already contracted the working-habit. (*Loom and Spindle*, 49)

houses such as the one run and occupied by her own mother and siblings,<sup>64</sup> and Robinson praised the “feeling of *esprit de corps* among these households.”<sup>65</sup> In short, the mill life of the 1830s and 1840s, communitarian to some degree, was considered “utopian”<sup>66</sup> or a “Yankee El Dorado.”<sup>67</sup>

Women writing nostalgically of their mill girl days during the 1830s and 1840s also recalled the flourishing and refined culture of the mill towns such as Lowell—a culture noticeably lacking in Phelps’s 1860s or 1870s novel setting. Harriet Robinson notes the improvement circles in which mill girls spent their evenings at study and discussion, one result of which was *The Lowell Offering*, a literary magazine produced by operatives from approximately 1840 to 1845.<sup>68</sup> She also recalls the poems and essays pasted to windows for weavers’ study and memorization and the books toted by little doffer girls who replaced full bobbins once every hour or so.<sup>69</sup> Charles Dickens, in his *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842), remarked on the lady-like attainments of “a joint-stock piano in a great many of the boarding-houses” as well as nearly universal subscription “to circulating libraries.”<sup>70</sup> Because of their education, religious dedication, and deportment, mill girls were mistaken for “ladies,” their dress

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<sup>64</sup> Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, 152.

<sup>65</sup> Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 55.

<sup>66</sup> Rivard, *A New Order of Things*, 65, 109.

<sup>67</sup> Robinson, *A New Order of Things*, 38.

<sup>68</sup> Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 63.

<sup>69</sup> Moran, *The Belles of New England*, 22; Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 28; Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, 175-176.

<sup>70</sup> Dickens, *American Notes*, 97. The workers’ library established by Perley in *The Silent Partner* represents her faith in education as a means of elevating workers as well as providing for the “mutual interest” of capital and labor. In an actual 1868 report on the Pacific Mills of Lawrence, Massachusetts, the author describes the mill’s circulating library supported by workers’ one cent per week contribution (“The Pacific Mills,” 128). The author attributes the mills’ avoidance of strikes to the library (129), to a workers’ relief fund (again, funded by workers’ two, four, or six cent per week contribution) (125), and to “cheerful” workrooms and affordable boarding houses (125).



"plain" and "simple" yet "tasteful."<sup>71</sup> Harriet Robinson writes of the mill girls of the 1840s,

They had, perhaps, less temptation than the working-girls of to-day, since they were not required to dress beyond their means, and comfortable homes were provided by their employers, where they could board cheaply. Their surroundings were pure, and the whole atmosphere of their boarding-houses was as refined as that of their own homes. They expected men to treat them with courtesy; they looked forward to becoming the wives of good men.<sup>72</sup>

In short, early mill girls, whether or not they came from middle-class homes (and many did, daughters of ministers and military men), often aspired to middle-class domesticity.<sup>73</sup> They engaged in self-improvement, social reforms, and literary activity during their working-class leisure, but many also planned to continue these activities as middle-class wives and mothers in the domestic sphere. But many other mill girls chose to become teachers, missionaries, artists, writers, and founders of libraries.<sup>74</sup>

To mill girls of the 1830s and 1840s such as Harriet Hanson Robinson and Lucy Larcom, textile mills offered opportunities for non-alienated labor. Women took pride in their work, which in stages resembled their pre-industrial home tasks; they were also able to accumulate savings beyond subsistence wages, and they were occasionally of a

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<sup>71</sup> Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 55. Lucy Larcom explains, "Still, we did not call ourselves ladies. We did not forget that we were working-girls, wearing coarse aprons suitable to our work, and that there was some danger of our becoming drudges. I know that sometimes the confinement of the mill became very wearisome to me" (*A New England Girlhood*, 182).

<sup>72</sup> Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 48-49.

<sup>73</sup> Robinson cites *Lowell Offering* editor Harriet Farley, the daughter of a Congregational minister (87), and Emmeline Larcom (Lucy's elder sister) who married a minister (98) in order to emphasize the respectability and piety among mill women.

<sup>74</sup> Pultz, "Introduction," xii.

class or situation that did not require that they sell their labor at all. They had the opportunity to pursue self-improvement outside (and even, occasionally, during) work hours.<sup>75</sup> These elements, as we shall see in Karl Marx's definition of "alienation," describe a workforce whose labor is not alienated. In fact, Robinson claimed that women saw themselves in their work. She writes of the mill girls,

The conscientious among them took as much pride in spinning a smooth thread, drawing in a perfect web, or in making good cloth, as they would have done if the material had been for their own wearing. And thus was practiced, long before it was preached, that principle of true political economy,—the just relation, the mutual interest, that ought to exist between employers and employed.<sup>76</sup>

What she does not mention is that mill girls, earning an above-subsistence wage, could accumulate savings and therefore strike or leave employment when they wished.

Robinson's concept of "mutual interest" was a moral component bolstering laissez-faire capitalism and, here, erasing the alienation of labor. Macdonald Daly, in his introduction to Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (a novel of English mill conditions), explains that the "theory of social union" and the complementarity of "masters and men"<sup>77</sup> (i.e., "mutual interest") became a bankrupt means of calming class tensions.<sup>78</sup> Even the very positive Harriet Hanson Robinson remarks, "Undoubtedly there might have been another side to

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<sup>75</sup> Philip S. Foner, in *The Factory Girls: A Collection of Writings on Life and Struggles in the New England Factories of the 1840s by the Factory Girls Themselves, and the Story, in Their Own Words, of the First Trade Unions of Women Workers in the United States* (1977), makes an important distinction between the conservative mill workers such as Robinson whom he labels "genteel" and the "militant" workers who had a much less rosy view of mill life.

<sup>76</sup> Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 44.

<sup>77</sup> Daly, qtg. Donald Read, "Introduction," xix.

<sup>78</sup> Daly, citing Michael E. Rose, "Introduction," xix.

this picture, but I give the side I knew best,—the bright side!”<sup>79</sup> One visitor to a mill village noted in 1844, “The dwelling houses of the village ... are crowded together close to the road ... their front doors open straight into the street .... The whole group has a slovenly appearance, and seem unfavorable to the habits of tidiness or feelings of home.”<sup>80</sup> Later workers felt that their interests were largely ignored. Although mill reminiscences of the 1830s praised the salubrious and industrious nature of the mills, these depictions collapsed under mid- and late-nineteenth-century realities of deteriorating mill conditions. In *The Silent Partner*, Phelps evokes a very different mill setting, one of alienated labor and environmental squalor—the promise of the mill community gone horribly wrong.

### **The Disputed Mill Ground**

At mid century, competing visions erupted over the conditions of the mills and their workers. The debates revealed the breakdown of “mutual interest” between capital and labor; they exposed class anxieties; and they located women at the heart of social change and stability. First, mill owners, with the power of both political and economic “capital,” and employees, with the limited power of the strike, had very little mutual interest. Dissatisfaction originated in disputes over wages and working hours and, according to historian Paul Rivard, over the increased speed of production offered by

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<sup>79</sup> Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 58. Joseph A. Conforti, a Fall River, Massachusetts native and author of *Imagining New England*, cites a Depression-era account of Fall River's decline: “To spend a day in Fall River . . . is to realize how limited were the imaginations of the poets who have described Hell” (287). Fall River had been the biggest cotton textile production center in the entire United States around the 1860s and 1870s (Rivard, *A New Order of Things*, 129). Fall River mills pushed up cotton thread counts in their cloth, producing “percale” which is still popular today (Rivard, *A New Order of Things*, 131).

<sup>80</sup> Rivard, *A New Order of Things*, 40.

the transition to water turbines around 1850.<sup>81</sup> Turbines enabled each piece of machinery to produce more in a shorter time.<sup>82</sup> Operatives were given more machines to oversee, and the pace of their work increased. Even in 1844 and 1845, Lowell operatives were petitioning for improved conditions and shorter working hours which a legislative panel investigated and demurely deferred to mill owners. William Schouler, chairman of the committee, wrote,

Your Committee believe that the factory system as it is called, is not more injurious to health than other kinds of indoor labor. That a law which would compel all of the factories in Massachusetts to run their machinery but ten hours out of the 24, while those in Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and other States in the Union, were not restricted at all, the effect would be to close the gate of every mill in the State.<sup>83</sup>

After failed strikes in 1845 and wage reductions, the native female workforce lost its faith in the “true political economy” and began to sever its association with the textile corporations. Moreover, the unfettered expansion of the textile industry demanded more and more workers who could not be supplied by native sources.<sup>84</sup> Immigrant labor, often comprised of entire families, filled the labor shortage. In any case, the New England 1845 population of immigrant laborers was only 8 %; by 1850, the population was 33%; by 1860, the mill worker population was 60% Irish.<sup>85</sup> Rivard posits that these immigrant laborers, such as the Irish immigrants fleeing the potato famine and the French Canadians, were more “tractable” and possibly less demanding of wage and

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<sup>81</sup> Rivard, *A New Order of Things*, 58.

<sup>82</sup> Rivard, *A New Order of Things*, 113.

<sup>83</sup> Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 147.

<sup>84</sup> Rivard, *A New Order of Things*, 118-119.

<sup>85</sup> Rivard, *A New Order of Things*, 119.

hour considerations than their New England predecessors.<sup>86</sup> Working options for women, then, immigrant or otherwise, dwindled as men entered the workforce. Moreover, the mix of genders and ethnicities in the mill-working population undermined the notion of mills as an extension of private home industry or domesticity.<sup>87</sup>

Second, competing portrayals of mill girls disputed their class affiliations and questioned their sexual and moral integrity. In 1840, journalist, social reformer, minister, and Roman Catholic convert Orestes Brownson wrote a scathing article on mill conditions and the victimization of the female operatives. He warned, "Few of them ever marry, fewer still return to their native places with their reputations unimpaired."<sup>88</sup> Harriet Farley, editor of the mill girls' literary publication *The Lowell Offering*, however, roundly rejected the piteous depictions of the workers. She exclaimed in a published reply,

And whom has Mr. Brownson slandered? A class of girls who in this city alone are numbered by thousands, and who collect in many of our smaller (towns) by hundreds; girls who generally come from quiet country homes, where their minds and manners have been formed under the eyes of the worthy sons of the Pilgrims, and their virtuous partners, and who return again to become the wives of the free intelligent yeomanary [sic] of New England, and the mothers of quite a proportion of our future republicans.<sup>89</sup>

One scholar argues, "Because the women workers were set up as representatives of the system as a whole, attacks on the corporations ended up being attacks on the

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<sup>86</sup> The term "tractable" is from Dunwell, *The Run of the Mill*, 118.

<sup>87</sup> With thanks to Jason Williams for clarifying this idea.

<sup>88</sup> Qtd. in Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 150; see also Amireh, *The Factory Girl*, 10.

<sup>89</sup> Cited in Robinson, *Loom and Spindle*, 151. See *Lowell Offering* for December 1841, 17-19.

workers themselves.”<sup>90</sup> Even at the height of the New England “mill girl,” ominous images countered the glowing accounts of mill life.

Third and finally, women’s mill work stirred debate over women’s place in society. The limited choices of women’s wage-earning occupations demonstrated a middle- and upper-class disposition to locate women within the home or within domestic occupations. Maintenance of traditional family structures and household work fulfilled ideologies of true womanhood and the older “Republican Motherhood” articulated by historian Linda Kerber. Moreover, isolating women from sectors of the workforce secured employment for men. Unfortunately, the limited wage-earning opportunities for women made them competitive berths and opened women to labor exploitation such as reduced wages and difficult conditions.

In 1870, after the Civil War had taken the lives of 620,000 male soldiers, a population imbalance forced single and widowed females to reassess their options for self-support and their definitions of domesticity. Many women lacked the opportunity to marry and mother, to maintain single-family homes and their places in them.<sup>91</sup> Women, too, were limited in the professions by which they might support themselves. Phelps biographer Lori Duin Kelly notes,

An 1870 United States Census, for example, showed that fully 93 per cent of all the working women in the census were employed as domestic servants, agricultural laborers, seamstresses, milliners, teachers, textile mill workers, and laundresses. As the nature of these activities indicates,

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<sup>90</sup> Amireh, *The Factory Girl*, 10.

<sup>91</sup> Phelps scholar Carol Farley Kessler explains, “By 1880, Massachusetts had 66,044 more women than men—a differential, more apparent in urban than rural areas, which eliminated for at least so many women the pursuit of marriage and motherhood” (*The Woman’s Hour*, 240). They were women without occupation.

women in the labor force were forced to engage in essentially the same work outside the home that they were compelled to do inside it.<sup>92</sup>

Feminized domestic labor—generally low-paid as in the infamous cases of seamstresses<sup>93</sup>—limited women's ability to earn wages and to establish an improvable living. The shifting make up and deteriorating mill conditions provide the impetus for Phelps's 1871 novel and social critique, *The Silent Partner*.

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps railed against these false strictures concerning women's lot; she sought to widen women's educational and occupational opportunities in order to protect them from victimization in the household or workforce. In her newspaper columns for the Congregationalist weekly *The Independent*, for example, she argued against gender roles and divisions of labor as false social constructions. In numerous articles and in her novels too Phelps argued for female professions. She envisioned a world of work beyond the confines of a single-family home; she advocated roles for women as doctors, bookkeepers, artists, writers, and saleswomen.<sup>94</sup> If women were to escape notions of middle-class domesticity, they needed a means of support not reliant on a husband's income as well as a physical space in which to enact this new domesticity. In an 1871 column, she observes,

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<sup>92</sup> Kelly, *The Life and Works*, 56. On the other hand, former mill girl Harriet Hanson Robinson marvels at the increased opportunity for women. In *Loom and Spindle* she observes "as late as 1840, only seven vocations, outside the home, into which the women of New England had entered" and notes in a footnote,

These were teaching, needlework, keeping boarders, factory labor, type-setting, folding and stitching in book-binderries. According to the census of 1885 (that of 1895 is not yet taken), wherein the subject of 'Women in Industry' was first specialized, by Hon. Carroll D. Wright, there are 113 industries, which subdivided, make 17,357 separate occupations. Women have found employment in 4,467 of these, while of the 113 general branches, they are found in all but seven. (Robinson, 3)

Frankly, I believe Robinson's evidence—showing women in only 26% of occupations—supports Kelly's point about women's limited options.

<sup>93</sup> See Amireh, *The Factory Girl*.

<sup>94</sup> See Phelps, "What Shall They Do?", 522, 523; see also Wegener, "Few Things More Womanly,"

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Boys and girls begin by being astonishingly alike. Up to a certain point they go hand in hand. The first thing we know the road splits, and, before one can tell what has happened, or why, or how, he is tripping down his side of it, she hers, and off they go, 'waving their hands for a last farewell' to that community of faculties, tastes, and interests, that possible (sometimes practical) likeness of mental and moral caliber which alone can constitute, in any sufficient sense of the term, *equality* between two people.

She concludes in a pithy juxtaposition, "Josiah plunges into calculus and Descartes. Mary subsides into custards and dishwater."<sup>95</sup> In another article, she emphasizes, "A man is *trained* to be strong. A woman is *trained* not to be. Good health is *expected* of a man. Ill-health is *expected* of a woman. In this simple difference lies coiled a complex influence. His expectations of society are to an all but mathematical extent the limits of the individual. What others look for in us, that we are."<sup>96</sup> In 1873 Phelps ridiculed the gender-specific educations such as she had experienced in her hometown of Andover, Massachusetts, where boys studied in the halls at Phillips Academy and the Andover Theological Seminary and girls in the rooms at Mrs. Edwards' School for Young Ladies.<sup>97</sup> Her article, titled "The 'Female Education' of Women," not only exposes the social construction of gender (as in a "female" education for women); it also joined the debate over women's physical and mental capabilities. Her antagonists included Reverend Lyman Abbott and his "The Education of Women"<sup>98</sup> and Professor Edward H.

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<sup>95</sup> Phelps, Elizabeth Stuart. "Where It Goes," 1.

<sup>96</sup> Phelps, Elizabeth Stuart. "Men and Muscle," 1.

<sup>97</sup> Kessler, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*, 17.

<sup>98</sup> Kelly, *The Life and Works*, 57.



Clarke's *Sex in Education* (1873), which itself sparked Julia Ward Howe's 1874 rebuttal, *Sex and Education*.<sup>99</sup> Phelps observes with cynical irony, "Woman is naturally useful to man; above all things, see to it that those characteristics which make her so are supremely fostered"; "Cultivate in them the obedient, the cowardly, the home-loving, and the emotive instincts."<sup>100</sup> Her acknowledgment of social construction of gendered roles and the false basis of the gendered spheres argument meant that women could restructure or reconfigure their roles according to their own interests and abilities. Phelps reasoned that women could learn as much, do as well, "dream and dare," as well as men.<sup>101</sup> And if a girl could be trained to one thing, she could be trained to another as easily. Phelps plays out this theory in *The Silent Partner*. Perley's dearest project is to free Sip from the limitation of mill labor and to launch her into service. For Sip, though, change comes too late; she declares herself unfit for any but mill work.

### **Production, Consumption, and Metonymy of Textiles**

Capital and labor collide—to the girls' mutual interest—when Perley, the silent partner, meets Sip, one of the mill workers. The young women initially meet on a rainy night when Perley, bored, is headed to the opera in her snug and newly scented and upholstered carriage. Sip is thrashing her way up a stormy street, clad only in a straw hat and plaid dress (17). When Perley's friends hop out en route to purchase a new fan, Perley languidly observes Sip's "manful struggles" against the storm. Perley's frank

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<sup>99</sup> Wegener, "Few Things More Womanly," 4; see also Phelps, "A Word for the Silent," 1634. Phelps contributed an essay to Howe's collection.

<sup>100</sup> Phelps, "The 'Female Education' of Women," 1409. See also Kelly, *The Life and Works*, 57.

<sup>101</sup> The "dream and dare" phrase originates in an 1880 poem by Phelps herself, qtd. in Kessler, "Introduction," xvii.

curiosity about “how the other half live”<sup>102</sup> spurs her to converse with Sip and later to visit her unannounced at Sip’s rented room in a damp stone house (79). Perley begins, through Sip’s tutelage, an education in mill conditions. Sip is indeed an expert; she claims, “I’ve worked to cotton-mills before the hoops; so they put me right to weaving” (50). (Previously, Sip worked in a hoop-skirt factory in Waltham [50].<sup>103</sup>) Here, Sip measures her life in textile-related terms, according to her stints at factories.

When Perley Kelso discovers how her own comfortable domestic situation differs from the mill workers’, she is forever altered. Rather than using textile imagery as static setting description,<sup>104</sup> Phelps shows textiles’ properties and associations shifting according to their context of production or consumption. A noted art historian, Anne Hollander, rhapsodizes about the flexibility, changeability and potentiality inherent in textiles—their ability to be remade, rewoven, recycled.<sup>105</sup> In *The Silent Partner*, Phelps questions their potential both to reflect and effect social change in the form of domesticity. Perley says, “I feel like a large damask curtain taken down for the first time off its cornice [...] [a]ll in a heap, you know, and surprised” (39). She associates herself in a type of metonymy with the very sort of textiles that her Massachusetts mill produces. She is a product of the mills, yet another man-made object comparable to a damask curtain, designed to ornament and exclude—to refine the home and guard it

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<sup>102</sup> Emerson, “Manners,” (1844).

<sup>103</sup> Hoops are the flexible, circular straps holding out a woman’s full skirt, a garment distinction reserved for grown women (“Hoop”).

<sup>104</sup> Daniel Miller briefly traces the use of literary descriptions of furnishings in the works of novelists such as Honore Balzac. These (ekphrastic) depictions provide a type of domestic realism. Miller explains, “This device was effective, but it was based on the individual as a relatively static, established personality, with an emphasis upon status or position in life, background origins, and sometimes suggestions of future aspiration. [...] a background ‘still life’” (Miller, “Alienable,” 107).

<sup>105</sup> Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes*, 1.

against foreign or lower-class aspirants.<sup>106</sup> Perley's connections to a damask curtain reveal a shift in her role as daughter and fiancé after meeting her working-class friend Sip. Most telling in Perley's description of herself as a fallen, disarranged damask curtain is the fact of its movement, its abandonment of assigned use-value. When the curtains—decorous separators between Perley's plush middle-class world and Sip's working-class one—come down unceremoniously,<sup>107</sup> Perley sees into the world around her.<sup>108</sup> Not only does she initiate reforms of "uplift," she also recasts her womanhood. She eventually eschews marriage and instead attaches herself to her mill workers, taking responsibility to assist their improvement. No longer is Perley a bastion of middle-class domesticity compared to a damask curtain, delineating inviolable, middle-class space. Indeed, she sees in the fallen damask her own implication in the capital/labor system.<sup>109</sup> Perley's own mills may produce the damask. Therefore, when she begins to discern the conditions and costs of textiles' production, Perley loses her faith in the luxurious damask's refining value; she concedes damask's different meaning

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<sup>106</sup> Phelps writes that the rain (and, presumably, other outside events) are "duly deadened by drawn damask" of the curtains (11). Amy Kaplan demonstrates how the ideology of domesticity could serve a similar function—to exclude aspirants to supposedly normative domesticity by staging the home as a bulwark against the foreign ("Manifest Domesticity," 185).

<sup>107</sup> Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes*, 69. Also, see Kessler, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*, 28, on the ways in which *Up Hill's* Miss Grant also blends the public and private by sharing "the hospitality of her own parlor," much as Perley does.

<sup>108</sup> Social anthropologist Irene Cieraad, in "Dutch Windows: Female Virtue and Female Vice," suggests that the home window, its fluctuating styles of decoration, and the duties of its cleaning and decoration suggest societal anxieties about females' public, visible roles. Her discussions may be extended to the nineteenth-century true woman of the middle class whose window decorations both separate her from the outside world and symbolically defend her virtue from non-middle-class claimants. Cieraad writes regarding Dutch practices as discerned in paintings of the period. She argues,

The symbolic intertwining of female and domestic integrity from the seventeenth century onward had an enormous effect on the amount of window decoration and on the guarding and cleaning of front windows. The concomitant process of domestication of women resulted in a solidifying of the fragile borderline of the window by more and more layers of curtain. By physically retreating from the window, the nineteenth-century upper-class woman stressed its dangerous character as a fragile borderline between female virtue and female vice. (50-51)

<sup>109</sup> With thanks, again, to Jason Williams's review.

in light of its context of mill production. Her trust in its ability to defend homes wanes when she learns how it destroys others'.

Material culture theorists of the past two decades justify associations of human subject and textile object. Anthropologist Daniel Miller has warned that artifacts such as damask curtains are not just to be read as passive objects created by human hands. Instead, such objects have a type of agency by which they, in turn, affect their producers or possessors.<sup>110</sup> In the context of consumption, Perley's damask curtain hung at the window reifies her middle-class womanhood. It protects her domestic domain from outside elements, and its composition of damask—an expensive fabric—confirms her class status. Material culture theorist Jules Prown recommends the study of sensory properties of objects as part of an interpretive analysis.<sup>111</sup> Damask is a thick fabric woven with reversible designs, possibly of mixed cotton, linen, and silk.<sup>112</sup> In Perley's identification with the fallen damask curtain, we may make some interpretive associations. For instance, damask's reversibility which doubles its usefulness and length of wear implies that Perley too possesses useful versatility. Figuratively, she is attuned to inside and outside her home and can weigh the needs of both her own middle class and the working class whose work she undertakes. In addition, damask, comprised of a labor-intensive weave and sometimes expensive materials, also has a higher intrinsic value than a plain weave or printed cotton, for example.<sup>113</sup> It is a durable, lustrous fabric associated with powers of refinement.

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<sup>110</sup> Miller, "Materiality: An Introduction," 38.

<sup>111</sup> Haltman, "Introduction," 2-7; Prown, "Mind in Matter," 1-19.

<sup>112</sup> Carmichael, Linton, & Price, "Damask," 111.

<sup>113</sup> See Prown, "Mind in Matter," 3 on intrinsic, attached, aesthetic, and spiritual values.

Although Phelps never identifies the particular textiles Perley's mill produces, she supports Marx's observation that a worker's condition seems to worsen in inverse proportion to the refinement of the product. He argues,

(The alienation of the worker in his object is expressed as follows in the laws of political economy: the more the worker produces the less he has to consume; the more value he creates the more worthless he becomes; the more refined his product the more crude and misshapen the worker; the more civilized the product the more barbarous the worker; the more powerful the work the more feeble the worker; the more the work manifests intelligence the more the worker declines in intelligence and becomes a slave of nature.)<sup>114</sup>

Marx explains that "the worker becomes a slave of the object"<sup>115</sup> which "stands opposed to him as an autonomous power":<sup>116</sup>

first, in that he receives an *object of work*, i.e. receives *work*, and secondly, in that he receives *means of subsistence*. Thus the object enables him to exist, first as a *worker* and secondly, as a *physical subject*. The culmination of this enslavement is that he can only maintain himself as a *physical subject* so far as he is a *worker*, and that it is only as a *physical subject* that he is a worker.<sup>117</sup>

Workers such as Sip become slaves to their own labor, or their own value as producers of damask. They can survive no other way but through more labor, more damask.

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<sup>114</sup> Marx, "First Manuscript," 123-124.

<sup>115</sup> Marx, "First Manuscript," 123.

<sup>116</sup> Marx, "First Manuscript," 123.

<sup>117</sup> Marx, "First Manuscript," 123.

Indeed, Phelps seeks to disturb her readers by the contrast of the civilizing associations of middle-class textile consumption and the disfiguring labor of textile production. Thus, when fine damask at Perley's windows drops to reveal the deformity and distress of her workers, she is implicated in her workers' dehumanization by damask.

Perley's friend Sip feels so fragmented by her labor that she compares herself to a patchwork quilt. Sip muses,

'Sometimes, [...] it comes over me as if I was like a—a patchwork bed-quilt. I'd like to have been made out of one piece of cloth. It seems as if your kind of folks get made first, and we down here was put together out of what was left.

'Sometimes, though, [...] I wonder how there came to be so much of me as there is.' (201)

She feels that the mills have consumed almost all of her being—her hopes, her health, and her own labor. To Sip, the patchwork bed-quilt represents a utilitarian but inadequate textile—pieces laboriously joined to make a whole—but just barely. The textile scraps that form a quilt represent the detritus of textile usefulness. Scraps, as I've argued in Chapter Four, are only one step away from relegation to the infectious piles of the ragpicker. Or, in another interpretation, theorist Jane Schneider describes the "potlatch" tradition in which the wealthy distribute scraps (of food or cloth, for instance) to indicate their superior or beneficent relation to the recipients.<sup>118</sup> And since Sip is alienated from the textile products of her labor, she may regard scraps with resentment, as a sign of her worker-as-commodity status. The patchwork quilt symbolizes for Sip the insufficiency of her wage labor in supplying a sense of home and

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<sup>118</sup> Schneider, "Cloth and Clothing," 207, 213.

subjectivity. Her discussion of the quilt shows that Sip has divested the textile of positive affective associations; the quilt does not recall for her pre-industrial forms of non-alienated domestic labor.

On the other hand, as the novel emphasizes the relative voicelessness of the mill folk and women, the quilt—here represented by Sip—becomes an unexpected voice on behalf of silenced characters and non-alienating, pre-industrial production. Studies of quilts as extraordinarily telling domestic artifacts suggest their agency. First, quilts served as scrapbooks of emotional and affectional ties, even across distance. Women exchanged via post, for instance, scraps of material to be incorporated as keepsakes in a quilt or scrapbook.<sup>119</sup> Each scrap evokes the affective associations—the attached value—of the giver, as opposed to the potlatch tradition that enforces a social hierarchy. Lucy Larcom, remembering her construction of a patchwork quilt, recalls,

So I collected a few squares of calico, and undertook to put them together in my usual independent way, without asking direction. I liked assorting those little figured bits of cotton cloth, for they were scraps of gowns I had seen worn, and they reminded me of the persons who wore them. One fragment, in particular, was like a picture to me. It was a delicate pink and brown sea-moss pattern, on a white ground, a piece of a dress belonging to my married sister, who was to me bride and angel in one. I always saw her face before me when I unfolded this scrap,—a face with an expression truly heavenly in its loveliness.<sup>120</sup>

Each textile scrap makes present a voice, a loved figure.

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<sup>119</sup> Kiracofe, *Cloth and Comfort*, 6, 25.

<sup>120</sup> Larcom, *Loom and Spindle*, 122-123.

Second, the quilt is an opus, a form of communication. Jane Barker, in her *A Patch-Work Screen for the Ladies* (1723), compares narratives to a patchwork quilt in which each woman might contribute an utterance. They are conceived, as Larcom's quotation indicates, out of great toil and economy, using bits of time and fabric to make a whole. Some quilts approached 70,000 pieces and required at least two years' work.<sup>121</sup> Quilting bees such as Susan Warner describes in *Queechy* unite a female community in shared, joyous labor and result in a textile designed to soften and warm the home. Thus, Sip's self-identification as a patchwork quilt is both problematic and rich for analysis. The quilt, which Sip sees as lacking, is also indicative of non-alienated labor, artisanship, subjectivity, and nurturing home space.

Phelps's association of subjects with textile objects extends also to men. Perley muses about Maverick Hayle, "He was as necessary to Perley Kelso as her Axminster carpets; he suited her in the same way; in the same way he—sometimes—wearied her" (Phelps, 38-39). The Axminster carpet, a machine-woven pile rug, softens the contours of the middle-class home by deadening sound and warming the space. It protects its owner from jarring realities of space. Similarly, Maverick tries to protect Perley from the labor realities of their mills beyond her doorstep. She wearies of his solicitude and condescension, and she learns to see objects of labor for what they really are.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Kiracofe, *Cloth and Comfort*, 46-47.

<sup>122</sup> LaRoche & McGowan, "4.2 Material Culture," 284, note that, Rag rugs, needlepoint coverings, and woven rugs served as floor coverings for the working class. According to historian Richard Stott (1990:173), one of the things that amazed newly arrived immigrants was the presence of rugs in workingmen's apartments. To not have a rug was to be poor indeed. By the late nineteenth century, rugs had become 'a symbolic representation, an icon, of the high American standard of living' (Stott 1990:173).



### The Political Economy Behind Domesticity

Perley's dreams of improved mill conditions derive largely from the works of political economy she stocks in the workers' library. She lodges John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* on the library shelf, and she accurately identifies Mr. Hayle, Sr.'s economic philosophy as "[Adam] Smith." But surely this understanding is of recent origin. After her father's death at the start of the novel, Perley confesses her ignorance of the management of business, but her desire to effect more change than the title "silent partner" might presume urges her to educate herself as an advocate for the working people whose plight Sip reveals to her. But Perley says that Mr. Hayle's reliance on Adam Smith "'ties [her] hands'" from substantial workplace improvements (141); she feels sorely her lack of theoretical language for workplace change. In fact, critic Russ Castronovo argues that language can limit or extend possible social change; he explains, "Any progressive thinking is at core a question of speech in which prior forms are outmoded by a new language that does not seem strange or unfamiliar."<sup>123</sup>

John Stuart Mill, however, in *On Liberty* (1859) and in the unmentioned *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), suggests to Perley ways to improve workers' lives. He advocates "the cultivation of higher moral and aesthetic sentiments" as well as "intellectual enlightenment" as means to "social reform," for example.<sup>124</sup> Perley thus launches her library, opens her home as lyceum, and seeks healthcare for mill laborers; Sip, her colleague and working-class mentor, preaches. If John Stuart Mill offers guidelines for social reform from within the capitalist system, Karl Marx—also unmentioned in the novel—gives reasons to envision reform outside of the system. He

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<sup>123</sup> Castronovo, "American Literature Internationale," 63.

<sup>124</sup> Riley, *Mill on Liberty*, 19.

argues that the capital/labor divide inherent in capitalism precludes improved conditions, and he envisions instead a new economic order.<sup>125</sup> Regardless, Perley's own reluctance or inability to unseat the capital/labor hierarchy implies her own possible investment in capital's support of middle-class domesticity.

Perley's familiarity with theorists in a liberal individualist tradition limits her thinking with regard to collective action. In her grand strike-stopping moment, Perley clings to the old language of "mutual interest" that, in the case of the strike, resolutely ignores the acute suffering of her wage laborers. She defuses the workers' strike with talk of costs and wages; she cannot imagine other options (such as Mill's suggestions for a decentralized socialism<sup>126</sup>) for intervening in workers' dissatisfaction. She cannot imagine a bridge over the capital-labor divide that looms at her feet. In an early meeting of Perley and Sip, Phelps compares them to "vain builders of a vain bridge across the fixed gulf of an irreparable lot" (21). Phelps implies the futility of their enterprise.

Marx, a political economist whose work was likely unavailable to Phelps or Perley, theorizes about the "fixed gulf" that Phelps identifies. He explains class divisions according to his interpretation of capitalism, as follows: capital (private ownership of means of production) relegates laborers to subsistence-level living in which the products of labor are inaccessible to the laborers. While capital is able to accumulate profit through the surplus value produced by workers' labor (beyond what is needed to compensate for raw materials, wages, and other "overhead"), capital

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<sup>125</sup> Marx's original essay, "Alienated Labor," for instance, appears in the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* not published in German until 1932 and not translated to English till 1956. He gained prominence, however, as a correspondent for Horace Greeley's *New York Herald Tribune*.

<sup>126</sup> Riley, *Mill on Liberty*, 23.

continually accumulates more capital or power, and the class divide widens through an “alienation of labor.” In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, including the essay, “Alienated Labor,” Marx explains that workers’ labor becomes alienated through four factors. Alienated labor is (a) “external” (because it is the product of a division of hour-driven labor that produces surplus value to which the worker has no claim) and (b) “forced,” since all a worker has to sell is his own labor, he must sell it in order to subsist. Alienated labor moreover involves (c) “self-sacrifice” and “mortification”<sup>127</sup> (since the workers’ labor is stripped of its potential for “self-definition” as a “life activity” and “degraded to a necessity for staying alive”<sup>128</sup>), and it engages workers in (d) a continual competition with other workers, thus “separat[ing them] from their fellow humans.”<sup>129</sup> None of Perley’s projects, unfortunately, remediate these factors which cause workers’ miserable conditions in the first place.

Capital, too, becomes alienated when it is confronted with the demand “to maximize profits or to get out.”<sup>130</sup> Marx ultimately identifies the alienation of both labor and capital—neither of whom, under Marx’s own definitions of alienation, have the liberty “to choose how or whether to work.”<sup>131</sup> Thus, Perley too is implicated in the preservation of this system of alienated labor. She requires the maximization of profit—led by the Hayles—in order to carry out her projects of reform. Her implication in the cycle of capital and labor limits her ability to imagine ways to reconfigure her relationship with Sip and the other workers. In fact, Perley herself may recognize her implication in the machine; near the end of the novel, she claims herself not as a

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<sup>127</sup> Marx, “First Manuscript,” 124-125.

<sup>128</sup> Schmitt, *Introduction to Marx and Engels*, 154.

<sup>129</sup> Schmitt, *Introduction to Marx and Engels*, 154.

<sup>130</sup> Schmitt, *Introduction to Marx and Engels*, 158.

<sup>131</sup> Schmitt, *Introduction to Marx and Engels*, 158.

“reformer” but as a “feeler,” someone able only to probe the extent of the problem, not solve it.<sup>132</sup>

Although Phelps does not employ Marx’s terms, she likely would concede his description of labor’s situation. John Stuart Mill himself (Perley’s authority in *The Silent Partner*) admits exceptions to a general philosophy of laissez-faire capitalism. Mill’s treatise first allows each person—here, each worker or mill owner—to choose his own life’s path—or employment—even if others might condemn his choice as “foolish, perverse, or wrong.” Mill explains,

As soon as any part of a person's conduct affects prejudicially the interests of others, society has jurisdiction over it, and the question whether the general welfare will or will not be promoted by interfering with it, becomes open to discussion. But there is no room for entertaining any such question when a person's conduct affects the interests of no persons besides himself, or needs not affect them unless they like (all the persons concerned being of full age, and the ordinary amount of understanding). In all such cases there should be perfect freedom, legal and social, to do the action and stand the consequences.<sup>133</sup>

Thus, Mill seems to condone a worker’s right to enter a “dangerous occupation” (Mill’s term<sup>134</sup>) as long as he has the capacity to assess the risk and take the consequences. Perley, then, if she indeed adheres to Mill’s ways of thinking, might argue that her workers have freely chosen to do such body- and soul-damaging labor in her cotton

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<sup>132</sup> As Jason Williams has pointed out to me, “feeler” is a textile term (albeit a 20<sup>th</sup>-century one) for the piece of machinery that gauges thickness of threads or cloth. The term “feeler” is also reminiscent of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century term, “feeder.”

<sup>133</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, 139.

<sup>134</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, 157.

mills. But here Mill also ascribes social authority in those situations where “a person’s conduct affects prejudicially the interests of others.”

Mill extends this caveat because he recognizes that individual liberty may be infringed by powerful groups, such as those who call themselves “the majority,” or, in the above example, what Marx would label “capital” and identify as a minority. Mill writes,

The ‘people’ who exercise the power are not always the same people with those over whom it is exercised; and the ‘self-government’ spoken of is not the government each by himself, but of each by all the rest. . . . the people [in majority or conceived as a majority], consequently, *may* desire to oppress a part of their number; and precautions are as much needed against this as against any other abuse of power.<sup>135</sup>

How does Mill—and, by extension, his New England protégée, Perley—propose to guard against this abuse? Mill scholar Jonathan Riley explains that, to Mill, “‘by common admission’, laissez-faire is often (though not always) more expedient than social regulation.”<sup>136</sup> Thus, workers’ union formations and strikes<sup>137</sup>, Mill suggests, are often more “expedient” than, say, minimum-wage laws. Another Mill scholar interprets Mill: “It is better for a person to go his own way, even to perdition, than to be improved or saved by paternalist compulsion. . . . The errors a person makes are ‘far outweighed by the evil of allowing others to constrain him to what they deem his good’ (p. 141). Human dignity is the stake; especially in the aspect of individual status. The human

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<sup>135</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, 75-76.

<sup>136</sup> Riley, *Mill on Liberty*, 116.

<sup>137</sup> Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 319.

dignity of the undignified requires that they be let alone.”<sup>138</sup> Even so, Mill concedes that workers have the right to petition for legislative intervention according to their own judgment, and he identifies particular cases where social regulation might be necessary, such as maximum working hours legislation or slavery. In slavery, an individual can no longer exercise his free choice, and Mill identifies poverty—such as suffered by Sip and other mill workers—as a usurpation of rights similar to slavery: “No longer enslaved or made dependent by force of law, the great majority are so by force of poverty; they are still chained to a place, to an occupation, and to conformity with the will of an employer, and debarred by the accident of birth both from the enjoyments, and from the mental and moral advantages, which others inherit without exertion and independently of desert.”<sup>139</sup>

Sip's predicament is endemic to the capitalist system and the poverty Mill describes. Sip is a product of wage labor which demands the replenishing of the labor pool through children raised only to earn wages and to keep competition among workers high and wages low. In one example, Perley attempts to insert Sip into different laboring environments, as if to force Sip to exercise choice. She proposes pre-industrial occupations such as domestic service which is task- rather than hour-driven, but Sip finds that she is fit for nothing else. Her lack of savings and education and her continual wearing away in the hoop-skirt and textile mills of Massachusetts make her a machine conditioned to only one task. She has no choice to change; her labor is “forced.” Both Marx and Mill are sympathetic to Sip's predicament in their studies of political economy.

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<sup>138</sup> Kateb, “A Reading of *On Liberty*,” 60-61.

<sup>139</sup> Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 378.

### **Confounding the Reformative and Transformative Properties of Textiles**

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps does not deny the power of textiles to soften the environment and refine the sensibilities. In fact, one evil of the housing provided to mill folk is its dearth of textiles that its inhabitants produce, a sign of the alienation of labor and a type of negative domestic environmentalism. In a positive sense, Phelps predicates her evening soirees on the ability of the refined and plush environment to awaken the mill workers' latent cultural faculties such as appreciation for music and visual art. Following John Stuart Mill, she seems inculcated with a sense of Katherine Grier's "domestic environmentalism," the belief in the softening, refining, and uplifting qualities of domestic, aesthetic objects.<sup>140</sup> As Marx scholar Richard Schmitt argues, "What workers produce does not belong to them; it belongs to their employers. But why is that a problem? Suppose workers in an automobile plant were paid not in money but in kind—that is, they received an automobile every so often; would they then not be alienated?"<sup>141</sup> In short, she tries to refine her workers with textiles and other domestic pursuits. But this cannot remedy the alienation of her workers' labor. Because they have worked for hours beyond the time it would take to accrue their subsistence wages, they produce surplus value (to be turned into profit) in which they have no share. Textiles made in their mills or even elsewhere, which they cannot afford to own, cannot supply their sense of self-realization in the process of production. Thus, she also sees the dangers of this domestic textile consumption. Phelps's novel reveals the costs of textile refinement associated with conventional middle-class domesticity. Textiles are used to exclude the lower classes from aspirations to middle-class domesticity by

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<sup>140</sup> Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 5.

<sup>141</sup> Schmitt, *Introduction to Marx and Engels*, 153.

producing textiles that the workers cannot afford; the fabrics nevertheless are also held out as emblems of the achievement and refinement that workers might someday earn.

Perley's second suitor Stephen Garrick represents the former hopes and much-touted potential of the mills to weave the American Dream, to reward the work ethic of the man who sacrifices class ties and labor loyalties to rise in the ranks from overseer to agent to partner. But Sip's suitor Dirk Burdock, a watchman, represents the thousands of others imprisoned by the long hours and low wages that limit opportunity. Dirk, early in the novel, vows to Sip, "I mean to be somebody yet, Sip" (147). But later, he concedes, discouraged, "There don't seem to be what you might call a fair chance for a man in the mills [....] The men to the top they stay to the top, and the men to the bottom they stay to the bottom. There is n't a many sifts up" (156). In fact, workers such as Dirk threaten middle-class exclusivity; Sip herself is initially described as a type of reef upon which the middle and upper classes could wreck. Sip is the "sunken danger," the working-class element in the opera setting at the start of the novel (29).

The threat of Sip's or Dirk's entry among the middle-class spaces of the opera or Perley's home is augmented by the raced associations of the worker. Even of Sip, Phelps observes, "There was dust about Sip, and oil about her, and a consciousness of both about her, that gave her a more miserable aspect than either. In the full light she looked like some half-cleared Pompeian statue just dug against the face of day" (81). Sip is described as "a little rough, brown girl" (140). She and the other laborers, begrimed and dehumanized, are simultaneously "racialized" as dark-skinned Others. Phelps's individuated treatments of workers and their lives, however, challenge racial prejudice and endow characters such as Sip with human dignity and resourcefulness.



Textile mills engaged in an albeit unequal oppression and degradation of racialized mill operatives and plantation slaves. Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner famously declared “an unholy alliance or rather conspiracy between the cotton planters and flesh-mongers of Louisiana and Mississippi and the cotton-spinners and traffickers of New England—the lords of the lash and the lords of the loom.”<sup>142</sup> The Hayle and Kelso cotton mills—whether or not they produce the Lowell or “negro” cloth—still contribute to the oppression of Southern slaves and, in a different manner, their own Northern operatives. Moreover, the cotton mills contain matter which infiltrates the lungs, hampers the breathing, and stifles the voices of its operatives.

In order to produce textiles, workers hunker in deplorable tenement conditions in relative proximity to their work. Phelps’s mills and tenements are a far cry from the neat rows of mills and boardinghouses portrayed in the nostalgic mill accounts of Lucy Larcom and Harriet Hanson Robinson. Eight-year-old Bub Mell, a child laborer (and scamp) whom Perley befriends after he ransoms her glove for ten cents (for tobacco), lives in a tenement owned and ignored by Maverick Hayle. Perley accompanies Bub home to “what struck her as a very unpleasant place; a narrow, crumbling place; a place with a peculiar odor; a very dark place” with “[h]oles in the stairs” and crumbling plaster (105). In Bub’s third-story “low, little room” Perley discovers “six children, a cooking-stove, a bed, a table, and a man with stooped shoulders” (106). There she learns that the smell originates from the flooded cellar with “offal from the mills” (109). These conditions foster disease and preclude cleanliness.

Phelps, too, acknowledges the influence of environment on character and development. Sip gestures to her beloved, deaf-mute, retarded, fifteen-year-old sister

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<sup>142</sup> Sumner qtd. in Moran, *The Belles of New England*, 65.

Catty whose propensities to drink and “worse” (84) render her a fearsome responsibility. Sip cries, “Look at that! You asked what difference the dirt makes. *That’s* the difference! To be born in it, breathe it, swallow it, grow on it, live it, die and go back to it—bah! If you want to go the devil, work in the dirt. Look at her!” (88). Sip blames Catty’s condition on her mother’s pregnancy in the mills, with “[t]he noise of the wheels” (96) and her father’s alcoholism and physical abuse, a powerlessness against mill conditions enacted in physical abuse. Critic Edward Cassady even proposes the novel as an early piece of muckraking.<sup>143</sup>

The significant moral and physical dangers of the mills loom throughout the novel. Mr. Kelso’s and Mr. Garth’s deaths in crushing incidents at the mills are followed by a child operative’s brutal mangling in a mill gear and Catty’s battering in the mill stream’s rocky floods. The images of mills as man-eaters are not unusual. Lucy Larcom, in her nonfiction account, describes one of the mill machines from the 1840s: “I felt as if the half-live creature, with its great, groaning joints and whizzing fan, was aware of my incapacity to manage it, and had a fiendish spite against me. I contracted an unconquerable dislike to it; indeed, I had never liked, and never could learn to like, any kind of machinery. And this machine finally conquered me.”<sup>144</sup> Larcom’s anthropomorphization of the machine might be cited as evidence of domesticity fostered in the mill,<sup>145</sup> but it simultaneously coincides with fictional accounts of machinery’s

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<sup>143</sup> Cassady, “Muckraking in the Gilded Age,” 137.

<sup>144</sup> Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, 226.

<sup>145</sup> Laura Hapke explains,

To complete the metaphor of the industrial family, some visitors to Lowell imposed the cult of domesticity on the factory. In these influential accounts, women tending their looms were perceived as extending homelike nurturing to the factory floor. But as early as that decade, Lowell’s profactory defenders had invoked the trope of the Happy Mill Girl: in harmony with her environment, cultivating her feminine virtues as she tended her spinning jenny. (*Labor’s Text*, 70)

ravenous appetite for operatives' dreams and lives. Mary Andrews Denison's "The Mill Agent" (1864) portrays a brutal gear accident; Phelps's "The Tenth of January" (1868) describes its protagonist's crushing and immolation in a mill.<sup>146</sup> Workers, in both fictional and non-fictional accounts, are frequently overwhelmed by the machinery they supervise, and they are frequently described as becoming machines in industrialized, degrading labor. Historian Steve Dunwell writes, "Factory work threatened to change human beings into mechanical components of the industrial system. Traditional guidelines for human value and personal accountability did not apply in this world of piece rates and time clocks."<sup>147</sup>

The belief in political economy and the justice of "mutual interest," promoted by men such as Adam Smith, rings hollow in Phelps's novel. Indeed, her mill owners have no interest whatsoever in their employees. They are like an actual Fall River, Massachusetts mill owner who proclaimed in 1855,

'As for myself, I regard my work people just as I regard my machinery. So long as they can do my work for what I choose to pay them, I keep them, getting out of them all I can. What they do or how they fare outside my walls, I don't know, nor do I consider it my business to know. They must look out for themselves as I do for myself. When my machines get old and useless, I reject them and get new, and these people are part of my machinery.'<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Amireh, *The Factory Girl*, 136.

<sup>147</sup> Dunwell, *The Run of the Mill*, 101.

<sup>148</sup> Dunwell, *The Run of the Mill*, 101.

The callousness literally bears out Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel's warning in *The Communist Manifesto* that the workman "becomes an appendage of the machine."<sup>149</sup>

Workers are a commodity with no stake in their work as a life activity.

Operatives' alienated labor is reflected in their own merging with the products of their labor. In a horrifying scene, little Bub Mell is literally ground into the textiles he is supposed to be producing. When Bub attempts to steal a plug of tobacco from his mill friend, Bub is snagged by the trousers and wound into the machine's belts. Phelps writes,

The engines close teeth on the song and the child together.

They [workers] stop the machinery; they run to and fro; they huddle together; they pick up something here, and wipe up something there, and cover up something yonder, closely; they look at one another with white faces; they sit down sickly; they ask what is to do next. (215)

Textiles take the "taint" of those who produce them. In this alienated industrial labor, the textiles absorb the blood, sweat, and effort—the very lives—of the workers who make them. Bub is the worker Marx describes who "puts his life into the object, and his life then belongs no longer to himself but to the object."<sup>150</sup>

Bub is not the only one to die in the production of textiles. Historians note the influenza, tuberculosis, typhoid, and cholera that ran down rivers and spread from mill to mill; they also identify the byssinosis which Sip calls cotton-cough. Mill historian William Moran explains, "[T]he textile workers were among the first Americans to be diagnosed with 'brown lung' or byssinosis, which impairs lung capacity, causing coughing and

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<sup>149</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 58.

<sup>150</sup> Marx, "First Manuscript," 122.

shortness of breath. Eventually, 70 percent of the early mill workers died of respiratory diseases; the comparable figure for Massachusetts farmers at the time was 4 percent.”<sup>151</sup> Sip, possibly nicknamed for her duties as a drawing-in girl (who sucks in the threads with a quick inhalation), develops a cotton-cough from the fibers lodged in her lungs. Sip explains, “It comes from sucking filling through the shuttle. But I don’t think much of it. There’s girls I know, weavers, can’t even talk beyond a whisper; lost their voices some time ago” (81).<sup>152</sup> Her sister Catty goes blind from her work wool-picking after she rubs her eyes. Maggie, an Irish operative in the 125-degree dressing room at the mill, repeatedly faints and staggers back to work so that she can earn the board for her brother in “an insane asylum” (234). Sip and Perley conspire to send her for “a week’s rest at least” with a family on the seacoast (233). The middle-class textile consumer, then, should be aware that the textile she has chosen to refine her domestic environment carries the weight of the working class in its very fibers. By making visible the labor portion of the textile industry, Phelps exacts a conscientious response to textile consumption.

Phelps’s motifs of voicelessness—the broken-winded weavers, Perley the “silent partner,” Catty the deaf-mute—suggest a powerlessness to defend one’s interests in work and home life. Maverick Hayle openly discusses the limited voice allowed to a middle-class woman such as Perley:

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<sup>151</sup> Moran, *The Belles of New England*, 23.

<sup>152</sup> The Lowell National Historical Park explains, “The self-threading shuttle eliminated the dangerous practice of drawing a thread through the eye of the shuttle with a quick sucking ‘kiss.’ This was dubbed the ‘kiss of death’ because lint, dyestuffs, and other hazardous materials were inhaled. Communicable diseases, especially tuberculosis, could also be transferred by the ‘kiss.’”

'Has a silent partner a voice and vote in—questions that come up?' asked Perley, hesitating, and rubbing off the little faces from her nails with a corner of her soft handkerchief.

'No,' said Maverick; 'none at all. An ordinary, unprivileged dummy, I mean. If you have your husband's that's another matter. A woman's influence, you know; you've heard of it. What could be more suitable?'

(60-61)

But the erasure of women's and workers' voices is incomplete. Hands and textiles become the means of communication and connection, a woman's empathetic touch as the means for a new domesticity, a potential sisterhood of silent but not silenced women.

### **Adam Smith and the Visible Hands**

Ultimately, Phelps makes visible the labor behind domestic textiles. She provides voices to Perley and Sip, and her omnipresent use of the words "hand" and "finger" draws upon the multivalent meanings behind tactile expression.<sup>153</sup> Hands and fingers become both the markers of class and the means of bridging it. At the start of the novel, Perley Kelso has white, folded hands, neat as rice paper (13). Phelps repeatedly describes Perley's pale and folded hands, useless in her lap. Later, however, Perley's hands show passion—as she begins to respond to the plight of the mill people—and she pounds her fist in frustration at her ignorance of mill conditions; she breaks off her engagement ring and bruises her finger (127-128). Soon after she breaks her engagement and vows to help her sisters in the mills. She cries, "I cannot

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<sup>153</sup> See Harper, "Fiction and Reform II," 226, on Perley's hand as a "naturalistic emblem."

tell you [...] how the world has altered to me, nor how I have altered to myself, within the past few weeks. I have no words to say how these people seem to me to have been thrust upon my hands,—as empty, idle, foolish hands, God knows, as ever he filled with an unsought gift!” (139). And thereafter, her hands are extended in aid, in handshakes with Maverick and Stephen Garrick, whose suits she refuses, and in hugs of comfort for Sip when they learn that Catty’s blindness is incurable. Sip’s hands, in contrast, are purple with work and cold. These increasingly battered hands, however, suggest engagement with the world, attempts to improve domestic opportunity for others. Moreover, Sip and her deaf sister Catty communicate via hand and finger signs that unite the two women.

Maverick identifies the mill people as his “hands,” uneducated and malcontented tools of the company. He isolates this one property of their existence, their ability to labor, in distinction from the head or the heart. Phelps observes, “There is something noteworthy about this term ‘strike.’ A head would think and outwit us. A heart shall beat and move us. The ‘hands’ can only struggle and strike us,—foolishly too, and madly, here and there, and desperately, being ill-trained hands, never at so much as a boxing-school, and gashing each other principally in the contest” (245). Workers, or factory hands, have nothing more than their hands—their labor—with which to seek redress.

Perley takes in Bijah Mudge, a sixty-six-year-old mill worker blacklisted from every New England mill because of his testimony on labor reform to the Massachusetts legislature. She becomes a faithful listener to his admonitions on behalf of labor. Significantly, Bijah foresees eventual victory on behalf of textile workers and quotes the biblical prophet Isaiah: “You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains

and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.”<sup>154</sup> This imagery of clapping hands, hands making sound, hands acting in joy, engages the major motif of “visible” hands that shapes the novel.

Phelps’s invocation of the book of Isaiah via Bijah Mudge is a tactical move which enables her to allude to the historical context against which Isaiah railed in the eighth century BCE.<sup>155</sup> Isaiah condemns the nation of Judah: “They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow’s case does not come before them.”<sup>156</sup> The rich of Judah pay lip service to a religion whose tenets they do not practice; they ignore the plight of the less fortunate. Instead, the rich women of Judah accumulate textiles: veils and sashes, “the fine robes and the capes and cloaks, the purses and mirrors, and the linen garments and tiaras and shawls.”<sup>157</sup> In a miniature exemplum that parallels Isaiah, Perley confides to her fiancé Maverick,

‘Last year, at Saratoga, I paid fifteen dollars apiece for having my dresses done up!’

‘Thus supporting some pious and respectable widow for the winter, I have no doubt.’

‘Maverick! how much did I think about the widow?’ (131)

Perley, like the rich women of Judah, accumulates textile goods without thought for those who produce them. Perley, aghast, calculates the prices of her fine domestic textiles and imagines how the money might have been more humanely spent. She gestures to a three thousand dollar shawl, lace languishing in her bureau at fifty dollars

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<sup>154</sup> Isaiah 55:12.

<sup>155</sup> “Isaiah Introduction,” 604.

<sup>156</sup> Isaiah 1:12.

<sup>157</sup> Isaiah 3:18-23.



a yard, a reupholstered and scented carriage, and six hundred dollar curtains (132, 132, 14, 127). She concludes, “[W]hy, Maverick! I am a member of a Christian church. It has just occurred to me” (132). Indeed, Perley has failed to “defend the cause of the fatherless,” including her textile workers such as Sip Garth. Maverick’s view of the case resembles a late-nineteenth-century view that “making and spending money were modern forms of caring,” a view possibly inspired by Russell Conwell’s speech, “Acres of Diamonds.”<sup>158</sup> Perley, however, sees this as a morally bankrupt means of social reform.

The ubiquitous hand references provide an ironic counterpoint to Adam Smith’s notions of the “invisible hand” articulated in his 1776 *The Wealth of Nations*. He writes,

As every individual, therefore, endeavors as much as he can both to employ his capital in the support of domestic industry and so to direct that industry that its produce may be of the greatest value; every individual necessarily labors to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the general interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I

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<sup>158</sup> Barton, “The Victorian Jeremiad,” 64.

have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good.<sup>159</sup>

Smith's "invisible hand" of the supposed "mutual interest" of labor and capital seems an empty gesture; it comes to represent the isolating vision of a laissez-faire political economy in need of revision, for its workers' sakes. Mr. Hayle, the elder partner in Perley's firm, denigrates her concerns over hours and working conditions by citing Smith. He intones, "The state of the market is an inexorable fact, an inex-orable fact, Miss Perley, before which employer and *employé*, whose interests, of course, are one, have little liberty of choice" (67-68). Perley, unschooled in economic argument but daily confronted by the immediate plights of workers, realizes that her concerns for reform remain unconvincing to those in power. She says to Maverick, "And yet, [...] your father and you tie my hands to precisely the same extent by different methods. [...] 'He with Adam Smith, and you with a *tête-à-tête*. He is too learned, and you are too lazy' (141). She, like the hands, flails against the cold logic of the company head, initiated by her heart and reaching out with her hands to feel the needs of the mill people. Smith's so-called invisible hand fails to account for the needs of the laboring people, imprisoning them in a grinding cycle of poverty and physical decay from which few escape.

Perley, despite her middle-class, laissez-faire allegiances, nevertheless attempts to expand concepts of middle-class domesticity. Her work with the textile mill workers forces her to expand her sense of motherhood to an entire mill community for which she claims a paternalistic/maternalistic responsibility. Critic Sybil Weir explains, "Phelps, in her conception of Perley Kelso, retains the central assumption that a heroine must act

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<sup>159</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry*, 166.

as a redeemer but widens the arena in which the heroine can carry out this mission."<sup>160</sup> When Maverick Hayle and his father deny her an active role in the firm, they reveal to Perley the passivity of her female role: "For the first time in her life, she was inclined to feel ashamed of being a woman" (59). With Sip's help, Perley acts for social reform. She slips off her feminized gender role with a sense of marvelous discovery, twice refuses roles of wife and mother, expands her single-family home to accommodate non-family, cross-class meetings, and risks her "whiteness" in contact with the "raced" workers.

### The Problem of Perley

Current scholars have wrestled with the fact of Perley's (and possibly Phelps's own) solidarity with middle-class interests. Why do Perley and Sip continue to live and work separately? Most important, why does Perley defend wage cuts to her suffering workers? Why does she stem the tide of the strike? The answer, perhaps, lies within Perley's own sense of class affiliation. Never does she assume a vow of poverty herself. Never does she scorn the idea of a positive domestic environmentalism by which lower classes might be refined. Never does she move out of her comfortable house. Never do we hear of her donating her three thousand-dollar shawl to charitable causes. Never is she mistaken for a mill girl. Lori Merish's *Sentimental Materialism* (2000) suggests a way of interpreting Perley's social reform strategy. Perley's consumption of textiles—of recontextualizing them in an exemplary domestic environment—may in fact be a type of production and a means of sponsoring her

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<sup>160</sup> Weir, "A Bacchante," 195.

workers' labor.<sup>161</sup> Laura Hapke, in her chapter on labor in the works of Rebecca Harding Davis, Louisa May Alcott, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, explains,

Advocates of cross-class sisterhood, the trio [Davis, Phelps, and Alcott] were not outright foes of capitalism. They sought to join traditional Christian values and woman's 'innate' selflessness rather than advance a solution to feminine industrial suffering. Sooner or later, they believed, women's efforts to build a more just society would ameliorate the unfair work conditions that weighed on workingwomen with families to care for. These early social protest authors were reluctant to implement radical change, however, and lacked a clear definition of working-class self-activity. For them too the myth of True Womanhood on the work floor would die hard.<sup>162</sup>

In short, Phelps (and her surrogate, Perley) is reluctant to abandon her class-associated notions of pious consumption and uplift.

Phelps's newly socially conscious Perley Kelso discovers that her mill's textiles maintain the divide between classes. Textiles, in fact, stymie the expansion of middle-class ideals; their cost (and the operatives' low wages and poor living conditions) prevents their use to refine the lower classes, to sensitize them to refined living through proper care, display, and appreciation of domestic textiles and garments. Although group identity such as a middle-class affiliation is generally marked by excluding difference, middle-class group identity is something that Perley wishes to spread. Moreover, Perley engages interested and aspiring operatives with library space,

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<sup>161</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 9.

<sup>162</sup> Hapke, *Labor's Text*, 77.

religious services at a specially built chapel, and evening musicales and readings. Perley invites members of the working class to develop the sensibilities of the middle class. They admire the statuary and carpets and curtains before returning to their dank mill housing. Again, Perley exerts a type of "'benevolent' caretaking" or "sentimental ownership" in her workers, aspects of what Merish identifies as liberal individualism marked by autonomy and private property ownership.<sup>163</sup> William Lynn Watson critiques this consumption; he cites in particular Perley's gift of the Beethoven engraving which both inspires Sip to higher calling and sharpens her own disgust for her mode of living. Watson also labels Perley's actions as a type of "colonization" of workers' time, thus preventing their involvement in worker activities at pubs, games, and meetings. Her activities, then, fragment worker solidarity and prevent future strikes.<sup>164</sup>

Perley, the "professional altruist,"<sup>165</sup> is no evangelist. She is a businesswoman in her own right who budgets aid (from her own income from the mill) for the mill people and who plans opportunity after opportunity for their uplift, education, and refinement. She is not out to erase class difference but to provide the opportunity to bridge it. Phelps's biographer Mary Angela Bennett muses on the incompleteness of Phelps's social reform project. Bennett writes that Phelps "defeated her own purpose by treating the mill owners so generously."<sup>166</sup> Phelps's plot spares Hayle the elder, Hayle junior and Garrick from the ready-to-strike mob. And although Perley is sometimes appalled by laissez-faire individualism, she does not refute it; she seems to accept the economic system as immovable. Literary critics Barbara Bardes and Suzanne Gossett explain,

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<sup>163</sup> Merish, *Sentimental Materialism*, 3, 4.

<sup>164</sup> Watson, "The Facts."

<sup>165</sup> Watson, "The Facts," 16.

<sup>166</sup> Bennett, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*, 62.

"Judith Fetterley attacks Perley as betraying the workers because she 'reinforces the mythologies through which the masters obfuscate reality and thus maintain power,' but there is no reason to expect her to do otherwise. At no time in the book does Phelps suggest that the basic capitalist system should be altered."<sup>167</sup> Although Phelps outlines the possibilities for "contractual equality between men and women," critic Brook Thomas explains, "Ultimately, however, she sanctions class difference."<sup>168</sup> She provides the opportunities for working women to enter the ranks of the middle-class; she avoids the exclusionist rhetoric associated with middle-class domesticity. But she concedes that some divides cannot be bridged.

Watson makes a persuasive case that, although Perley acts as an apologist for laissez-faire capitalism, she also acknowledges the hardships inflicted on working classes.<sup>169</sup> He writes,

If we place *Silent Partner* in the context of strike-ridden 1870 Massachusetts, however, Perley's strikebreaking emerges as anything *but* a paradoxical sign of Phelps's limited political vision. Rather than being a sign of muddled political vision, Perley's fictive strikebreaking and riot control actually *exemplify* the political vision of the emerging middle class. *Silent Partner* does the cultural work of representing and comprehending class difference, an issue of *tremendous* import given the feverish rate of industrial expansion in Phelps's Massachusetts.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Bardes & Gossett, *Declarations of Independence*, 111.

<sup>168</sup> Thomas, *American Literary Realism*, 116.

<sup>169</sup> Watson, "The Facts," 10.

<sup>170</sup> Watson, "The Facts," 10-11.

At the conclusion of *The Silent Partner*, the novel's prominent voices belong to Sip, the street preacher, and Bijah, the Isaiah-quoting prophet. They have become more than hands; they have become voices of workplace and domestic reform. Although Phelps does not suggest how their prophecies may be fulfilled, she nevertheless probes the limits of liberal ideology and reform.

### **Conclusion**

Phelps's condemnation of the company town, with its company houses and board, defies competing portrayals of mill opportunity. She offers a bleak contrast to the giddy portrayals of mill-girl life by Harriet Robinson and Lucy Larcom in the 1830s and 1840s. These women's nostalgic accounts spin tales of blooming girls come to Lowell to earn money for college-bound brothers and to participate in the lending libraries, lyceums, and cooperative housekeeping. They are the daughters of ministers and farmers, refined and wholesome; they are the future wives and mothers of upstanding citizens. Robinson's and Larcom's mill-girls sojourn at the mills, playing at a vast working- and middle-class sisterhood on the rise, bonding in boarding houses and organizing cooperative housekeeping. Many move on to middle-class domesticity as wives and mothers in single-family homes.

Phelps's mill town of Five Falls, however, is a domestic disaster. Women are prey to aggressive seducers such as Irish Jim; families languish, six to a room, in dank tenements with broken stairs and brackish basements—all reminiscent of the urban menace Sadlier attempted to rebuff with textile temperance. Phelps's mill town is no feminine, communitarian, industrial project but an urban nightmare of exploitation.

Indeed, Sip Garth refuses to marry her suitor for fear of bearing a child who, through financial necessity, will also be ground into the gears of mill-life. She tells Dirk, “I’ll not marry you, [...] I’ll not marry anybody. Maybe it is n’t the way a girl had ought to feel when she likes a young fellow, [...] I’ll never bring a child into the world to work in the mills” (287). Sip thus rejects conventional marriage in order to stymie the generational clutch of the mill (288). Perley expresses a discontent, a restlessness and discomfort with middle-class domesticity, but finally she advocates no alternative. She chooses not to marry or have children either, but she can imagine no domestic space for the workers, not even those she is in the process of “refining.”

Phelps’s novel suggests that mills’ early promise of providing an alternate domesticity or female financial independence has proven threadbare, but she hopes that it might still be rewoven—perhaps by the “working-class activity” of Sip and Bijah themselves. Textiles, as seen in previous chapters, replicate and enact middle-class values of refinement and home-building, but they also enable communitarian independence and biblical precedent for women’s power, repudiation of textile goods, and the possibility of a communitarian utopia built on the grounds of women’s work (such as in the Shaker village depicted in Chapter Two).

*The Silent Partner*, in fact, ends hopefully.<sup>171</sup> Perley confesses to her rich friends who have the tendency to snicker at her reforms, “I am not a reformer; [...] I am only a feeler. The world gets into the dark once in a while, you know; throws out a few of us for groping purposes” (241). Perley hopes to reconfigure a domesticity predicated on celibate, so-called spinsterhood and an extended motherhood encompassing all mill

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<sup>171</sup> Mari Jo Buhle and Florence Howe, in their “Afterword” to *The Silent Partner*, describe the ending of the novel as a “more imaginative, hopeful resolution” than in “The Tenth of January,” for example (370).



people, but her “groping” implies that she cannot envision this new domesticity or a way to achieve it.

Perley’s sense of being a “feeler” anticipates the future trajectory of female domestic reform. Jane Addams (1860-1935), the famous founder of Chicago’s Hull-House, was herself partly inspired by the sight of the hands of London’s working-class poor as they bargained for rotten food. She recalled,

and yet the final impression was not of ragged, tawdry clothing nor of pinched and sallow faces, but of myriads of hands, empty, pathetic, nerveless, and workworn, showing white in the uncertain light of the street, and clutching forward for food which was already unfit to eat.

Perhaps nothing is so fraught with significance as the human hand, this oldest tool with which man has dug his way from savagery, and with which he is constantly groping forward. I have never since been able to see a number of hands held upward, even when they belong to a class of chubby children who wave them in eager response to a teacher’s query, without a certain revival of this memory, and clutching at the heart reminiscent of the despair and resentment which seized me then.<sup>172</sup>

Her attention to the workers’ hands is reminiscent of Perley’s newly awakened comprehension of class difference.

As Watson indicates, Perley’s recognition of class difference—and its environmental and industrial origins—causes her to rely on the help of the working classes she hopes to aid. Her efforts with Sip and Bijah follow Mill’s advocacy of “democratic methods in social action” as “opposed [to] elite stewardship,” a cross-class

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<sup>172</sup> Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, 69-70.

practice Addams would later follow.<sup>173</sup> Opened in 1889 and modeled after a similar endeavor at Toynbee Hall in London, Addams's Hull-House responded to needs of the working-class community in which it was situated, providing meals, day care, bath houses, and classes, for example. Resident women took their cues from working-class neighbors, visiting, learning, and procuring resources for community needs. Addams, much like Phelps's Perley, acknowledged "that the dependence of classes on each other is reciprocal."<sup>174</sup> In his introduction to *The Social Thought of Jane Addams*, Christopher Lasch explains that Addams's settlement "aimed not so much at helping the poor as at understanding them; and by understanding them, at bridging the chasm that industrialism had opened between social classes."<sup>175</sup> Addams's work in many ways fulfills the promise of *The Silent Partner*. Middle-class women, lodged in a settlement house, put their extensive faculty and cultivation to work in conjunction with their working-class counterparts.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Brown, "Introduction," 8.

<sup>174</sup> Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, 80.

<sup>175</sup> Lasch, "Introduction," xiii-xiv.

<sup>176</sup> Addams, perhaps thinking of herself and women such as Phelps's Perley, explained, "We have in America a fast-growing number of cultivated young people who have no recognized outlet for their active faculties" (*Twenty Years at Hull-House*, 92).

## CONCLUSION

While Warner accords Ellen's textile practices supposedly normative, missionizing uses to refine taste and to define class and race affiliations, the domestic texts of Adams, Wilson, Sadlier, Stoddard, and Phelps turn a deliberate hand to the unconventional uses of textiles to transform the domestic ideology of space. The protagonists or narrators exploit the feminine associations of textiles to suggest women's power to achieve subjectivity and to individuate space. These particular mid-nineteenth-century writers, and others such as Louisa May Alcott in *Little Women* (1868) who might have contributed to an extended version of this study, demonstrate the prevailing hope that women authors invested in textiles. Their textile imagery anticipates shifts in domestic ideology such as the evolution of New Womanhood; it shows women exerting control over both property and space by engaging in the production, consumption, and containment of marketplace goods. Through unconventional textile uses, women—at least in literature—might physically and ideologically alter space.

American novels of the late nineteenth century, however, exhibit a sharp decline in conscious manipulation of domestic textiles. The textual fascination with textiles' transformativity wanes after 1870. First, textile fascination faded as textiles' variety and production became a commonplace. Second, the domestic novel, as such, with its attention to the daily details of the female existence and the rise and

domestic education of its heroine, began to splinter.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the women's movement entered new phases of activism—note the upswing of utopian writing<sup>2</sup>—that made reconfigured, rather than reimagined, domestic space seem a rather paltry contribution to the improvement of women's condition. While, among the authors of this study, only Elizabeth Stuart Phelps would have identified herself as an activist for women's rights, the authors here were nevertheless engaged in articulating and often reframing the needs of women's space and property.

Like any new technological advance, the mid-century textiles produced with new synthetic, aniline dyes and new forms of printing and weaving became “old hat,” and their captivation loosened as time progressed. After the Civil War and the resumption of the cotton trade, textile production soared. But nothing devalues an object more than its ubiquity, and the wide availability of mass-produced textiles seems to have dissipated their mystery and power to alter space. In fact, by 1880 the Arts and Crafts movement in the decorative arts (which included domestic textiles) promoted hand manufacture and the revival of older forms of dyes, patterns, and production. The Arts and Crafts movement essentially rejected the mass production of textiles that had promised such a commercially democratic means of

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<sup>1</sup> The domestic novel, as such, grows scarce, but its facets appear in what is labeled “school-girl romance” or juvenile fiction; the historical romance; local color fiction; realist novels; and utopian fiction. The “school-girl romance,” initiated by Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), was succeeded by “Sara Crewe” (1887; expanded into *A Little Princess*, 1905), *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1903), *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), and Jean Webster's *Daddy Long-Legs* (1912), among others. See Hearn, Michael Patrick, “Afterword,” 161. These works, with their juvenile heroines, much like many domestic novels, were more specifically marketed as juvenile works.

<sup>2</sup> See Carol Farley Kessler's anthology of utopian fiction, *Daring to Dream: Utopian Fiction by United States Women Before 1950*, which includes works by Phelps, Marie Howland, and Lillie Devereux Blake, for example.

domestic reconfiguration and embraced an economy of scarcity and craft, thus limiting textiles' transformative potential.<sup>3</sup>

The loss of interest in the possibilities of textiles parallels a loss of faith in the home and its feminine associations to effect reform. As Nina Baym has suggested, domestic novels of the mid-nineteenth century traded on the notion that the home could be the launch point of both moral and domestic (homely and national) reform, a notion dignifying woman's role in the domestic sphere.<sup>4</sup> The home, moreover, effected much of its reform by defending itself and its residents against the market economy and competitive practices. But as the Gilded Age of the 1870s and 1880s ensued, consumer excesses in the form of increasing domestic "gimcrackery" and textile display showed the home complicit with allegedly external market forces.<sup>5</sup> The domestic novel, then, declined in part from what Baym calls a loss of credibility for "the redemptive possibilities of enlightened domesticity" as it was seen to be in league with the forces it was supposed to oppose.<sup>6</sup> The home—and its textile goods—and their mutual associations with feminine power and influence were no longer the site of social transformation envisioned by the authors I study.

A spate of economic scandals and panics during the 1870s likely contributed to a skepticism about any reforms played out within the home or reliant upon consumption of goods. The Crédit Mobilier scandal of 1872, the depression of 1873, and a series of labor strikes all demonstrated the need for women's literary work to

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<sup>3</sup> See Handlin, *The American Home*, 430, 441-442.

<sup>4</sup> Baym, *Woman's Fiction*, 27.

<sup>5</sup> Baym, *Woman's Fiction*, 299. I consciously draw the work "gimcrackery" from William Dean Howells's use of the term in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889) as the Marches critique the excessive decorations in Mrs. Grosvenor Green's New York apartment.

<sup>6</sup> Baym, *Woman's Fiction*, 50; see also Harper, "Fiction and Reform II," 234.

promote more forceful reforms in order to protect women's interests in an unstable economy.<sup>7</sup> Literary utopias such as by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Edward Bellamy, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman frequently outlined communal or socialist societies where members rights' and material necessities were distributed equally.

The domestic problems that Phelps's Perley Kelso attempted to "feel" and identify in *The Silent Partner* and whose resolution was partly realized in the real-life reforms of women such as Jane Addams eventually demanded literary treatment far more radical than the material alterations proposed in the mid-nineteenth-century domestic novels and texts. Literary utopias outlined, often very practically, the material, economic, and social reforms conducive to securing women's subjectivity and space. Textiles continued to play a part. In fact, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) outlines a female utopian society whose scrap of fine textile washed downstream not only testifies to the society's high civilization but also leads three male explorers to its lands and opens the society to emulation.<sup>8</sup>

The textile-imbued texts of this study make use of domestic realism through careful identification and description of domestic textile goods, and they foreshadow the realist movement often exemplified by William Dean Howells, Henry James, and Edith Wharton. Warner, Adams, Wilson, Sadlier, Stoddard, and Phelps also model pragmatic, transformative textile action that anticipates both literary realism and utopian literature. Novels at the end of the nineteenth century (1870s to 1900) by no means eschew the domestic realism often produced through textile detail of furnishings and garments. The use of textiles, however, is often more reflective than

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<sup>7</sup> See Parrington, *The Beginnings of Critical Realism*, 244, and "The Literature of an Expanding Nation," 2, for discussion of economic turns in the 1870s.

<sup>8</sup> Gilman, *Herland*, 6, 7, 10.

effective, two terms that I've used throughout this study. Indeed, after mid-century, textile images appear to be mostly characterological rather than transformative of domestic space. Novels such as A.D.T. Whitney's *Hitherto: A Story of Yesterdays* (1869) or Amelia Barr's *She Loved a Sailor* (1890-1891) maintain a litany of dry goods descriptions but merely for the purposes of contrasting settings, characters, and conditions. In Barr's novel, for example, set in 1830s New York City, a mountain of silks, satins, laces, cashmeres, and India goods is heaped to prevent its immolation in a raging city fire. Even though the whole pile burns to flinders, it represents the primacy and resilience of New York's textile trade and industries.<sup>9</sup> Barr also describes the coarse "negro cloth" that provides a poignant contrast to the pink silk with which the protagonist initiates courtship.<sup>10</sup>

Men's late-nineteenth-century novels also embrace the uses of textiles as setting or character critique and domestic realism. Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889) satirizes the ubiquitous portières that loom in every doorway and corner, guarding barrelsful of knick-knacks. Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) uses extensive textile setting description to link physical properties with character.<sup>11</sup> And in terms of textiles as garments, surely Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) provide the most chilling associations with and paradoxes of fabrics and conditions.

This study of the perceived power of domestic textiles at mid-century demonstrates a faith in a particular means of social transformation. I believe it

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<sup>9</sup> Barr, *She Loved a Sailor*, 337, 340, 357.

<sup>10</sup> Barr, *She Loved a Sailor*, 210, 10, 126.

<sup>11</sup> See James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 36, 198, 268, 314, 321, for examples of his careful domestic textile "inventories."

provides concrete evidence of how these women authors plotted a path from passive, angelic, and victimized heroines toward a New Womanhood dictated not by moral pitch but by professional and material engagement with the world.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Cogan, *All-American Girl*, 258, 259.



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### Key to Abbreviations

BPL	Courtesy of the Trustees of Boston Public Library
CSV	Canterbury Shaker Village
CIA	Constitution Island Association
SDL	Collection of the United Society of Shakers, Sabbathday Lake, Maine
UNH	Milne Special Collections and Archives Department, University of New Hampshire Library, Durham, New Hampshire
USMA	United States Military Academy Library

Adams, Hester A. "A Holy and Divine Roll, Written By the Holy Prophet Elisha, Before the Altar of Wisdom and Love, December 14, 1842." *A Holy, Sacred and Divine Roll and Book; from The Lord God of Heaven, to The Inhabitants of Earth: Revealed in the United Society at new Lebanon, County of Columbia, State of New-York, United States of America. Read and understand all ye in mortal clay. In two parts. Received by the Church of this Communion, and Published in Union with the Same.* Ed. Philemon Stewart. Canterbury, NH: Printed in the United Society, 1843. 225-229. [UNH.]

-----. *Memorandum Book.* [Receipt for coloring candy.] January 1845-March 1855. [SDL.]

-----. "A Sheet Prepared and Written According to Mother Ann's Directions." January 13, 1845. [SDL.]

-----. "Testimony of Hester Ann Adams." *A Holy, Sacred and Divine Roll and Book; from The Lord God of Heaven, to The Inhabitants of Earth: Revealed in the United Society at new Lebanon, County of Columbia, State of New-York, United States of America. Read and understand all ye in mortal clay. In two parts. Received by the Church of this Communion, and Published in Union with the Same.* Ed. Philemon Stewart. Canterbury, NH: Printed in the United Society, 1843. 344-346. [UNH.]

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